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COOL CONRAD THE DAKOTA OR FROM LAIR TO LAIR.

A Tale of 'Frisco and the Gold Camps.

BY CAPT. H. HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "BROAD-
CLOTH BURT," "CALIFORNIA CLAUDE,"
"FLASH DAN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO WARNINGS.

THE street lamps of San Francisco were being lighted one evening, a few months ago, when a handsome, sleek and elegantly-attired man of perhaps thirty-six entered the reception-room of one of the first-class hotels, and walked straight to the register.

He was a man who would have attracted more than casual attention anywhere, and the people who happened to be in the hotel office at the time, gave him more than a passing glance.

Under his raven lashes he had a pair of sparkling and piercing black eyes, and his face, which was entirely devoid of beard or mustache, was clean cut, and faultless in every particular.

Without noticing, apparently, that he had attracted more than usual attention, he ran his

"LET IT LIE THAR," SAID CONRAD, CATCHING THE LOOK, AND POINTING AT THE HAND.
"THAR MAY BE ANOTHER BESIDE IT AFORE DAYLIGHT."

finger over the page before him and inspected the names that appeared upon it.

Half-way down the column the finger stopped for the briefest space of time over this registry:

"NOAH NELSON, SAN DIEGO, CAL."

He looked at the inscription long enough to fasten it on his memory, and then, with a slight bow to the clerk, he turned and walked away with the same coolness and unconcern with which he had come to the desk.

He had scarcely left the hotel ere a man rose from a chair in one corner of the office and walked toward the counter, nervously biting an unsmoked cigar.

"I guess I'll settle my bill," this man said to the clerk.

"Yes, Mr. Nelson," was the reply. "Are you not leaving us sooner than you expected?"

"I think not. I said when I came, you know, that I was liable to take flight at any time. The time has come."

The last two sentences were spoken with a smile, and the clerk turned to make up the guest's bill.

While he stood at the counter, Noah Nelson presented a study for those who thought it worth while to study him.

He was a man of medium height, quite well built, rather dark-skinned, and wore spectacles.

His clothes were not of the fine texture that distinguished the garments of the man who had just examined the register, but they were neat and serviceable—good enough for Mr. Noah Nelson, we should say.

His face was covered by a short grayish beard, for he looked past forty-five, and withal appeared like a man who had seen a good deal of the world.

When his bill had been figured up and presented, it was paid, and as the clerk leaned over to check it on the register, Noah Nelson caught his wrist and said:

"You will do me a favor, sir—a very great favor—if you will let the registry remain as it is. Adjust your cash book, sir, but leave my name unchecked."

It was an unusual request, and the eyes of clerk and guest met while the latter spoke.

"We don't like to do business in that way, Mr. Nelson—"

"But I ask it," was the interruption. "I promise you that one of these days everything shall be explained. I ask this as a particular favor to—Noah Nelson, sir."

The clerk made no immediate reply, but did not check the name as he intended.

"Thanks," said the man from San Diego. "I will remember this favor. I will get what little baggage I have and make my exit." And the next minute he was ascending the broad staircase which led to the floors above.

He did not pause until he reached, on the third floor, room 201, the door of which he unlocked and entered.

Not even the "little baggage" of which he had spoken was to be seen.

The room had been arranged for the day, and its scanty contents were visible at a glance from the door.

"Thought I wouldn't know you, eh?" chuckled the man from the South as he shut the door behind him. "The moment I set eyes on you, I knew you. Got up in the world since the days of your brigandage: haven't you? It looks as if I've found you a gold prince in 'Frisco. Never mind, tiger; unless I am fooled, your days of success are near their end. I'm here incog, and not a soul in San Francisco knows me. I have struck the trail I wanted before I hoped to. We will see before three days where vengeance strikes."

He had hardly closed ere a light rap sounded on his door, and he opened it, to confront a boy who held out a letter.

"Is your name Nelson?" asked the boy.

"Yes; Noah Nelson."

"All right; this is 201. Here is a letter for you."

The guest looked astonished.

A letter for him when he had just boasted that nobody knew him in San Francisco?

There was some mystery about this.

"Who gave it to you?" he asked, as he took the letter from the boy's hand.

"I promised not to answer a question like that."

"Oho!" cried Noah Nelson. "The sender wishes to remain incog., eh?"

"I guess so."

The boy drew back.

"Does he wait for an answer?" asked the man.

"No, sir. She went off the moment I took the letter."

"There! you let the cat out of the bag that time, boy," laughed Nelson. "A woman sent this letter."

The boy looked perplexed and ashamed of himself.

"I ought to be kicked for it, too," he said. "Confound it! I thought I could keep a secret, but here I give it away. Well, you've got a good deal of information, haven't you? You know all that I do now, ha, ha! Good-night,

Mr. Nelson. I hope that's a love-letter. Good-night, old pal!" And away bounded the boy and whisked out of sight before Nelson could detain him.

The man from San Diego went to the gas jet and looked at the superscription on the letter.

It was written in a somewhat feminine hand, but still rather coarse, with the letters irregular.

He was not long breaking the seal and a minute afterward he stood erect, reading the letter, which was brief and ran as follows:

"CONRAD CATCHALL:—

"Your disguise is as thin as a cobweb. I knew you the moment I set eyes on you. You will be in a man-trap inside of twelve hours if you remain in 'Frisco. They are not all here, but the worst wolves of the pack are. You were spotted the moment you landed, and to-night I would not risk the turn of a card on your life. Leave 'Frisco or die; take your choice."

"4-11-21."

The man in room 201 read this startling message twice before he looked up.

When his eyes were lifted from the paper, they emitted gleams of resolution and defiance; but all at once he burst into a laugh.

"So my disguise is as thin as a cobweb, eh? To whom? Hang me! if I wouldn't like to know, just for curiosity. Who ever wrote that letter has caught on to my name and that puzzles me. Yes I am Conrad Catchall, and whether I was spotted or not the moment I struck this city, I'm goin' to remain. By the eternal! I am not going to be run off by a warning like this. 4-11-21, eh? I'll remember the signature, but this document I'll serve thus!"

He stuck the message into the flame of the gas and held it there until not a vestige of it remained; then he extinguished the light.

But it was not until ten minutes had passed that the door of room 201 opened to let out a man, and that individual went down the stairs and walked to the clerk's desk.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "whether Mr. Noah Nelson whose name I see on your books, has left the hotel?"

"He has not left, I believe, but is up in his room. I'll call a boy—"

"No hurry. I'll just light a cigar and wait for him," and the inquirer who was a gray-eyed, smooth-faced man, stepped back and bit the end off of a cigar.

"Ha! I thought my disguise was as thin as a cobweb, 4-11-21!" he laughed, and instead of waiting for Noah Nelson, he passed out into the street.

It was early night in the great city of the Golden State, and the street had many pedestrians of both sexes and all ages.

The smooth-faced man walked slowly up the sidewalk, and did not pause until he reached a letter-box.

All at once he drew a letter from his pocket and slipping it into the box resumed his walk.

"Well, how goes it at camp?" asked a voice near at hand.

"Not very well," was returned.

"What's happened thar?"

"Su'thin' startlin'."

"Out with it, Tunis."

"Red Roy's made a diskivery."

"He has?"

"That's what he says. They almost came ter trigger work t'other night, but they didn't quite git thar."

"Has he any pards?"

"I don't know. Some ov the boys didn't say much."

"An' you came to 'Frisco to post me?"

"Yes."

"When did you leave?"

"Night before last."

"That seems an age. Tell me, Tunis, was Red Roy's discovery concernin' Karl, the Kid?"

"It war."

"Jehosaphat! an' ef the devil has pards, thar'll be death ter pay at Pistol City."

"Will you go back?"

"Yes, as soon as I can see the boys. Woe to Red Roy an' his pards when I git thar! See hyar, Tunis. This is the kind ov letters a fellar gits in 'Frisco." And the speaker thrust a letter into his companion's hand.

The man who had heard all this saw Tunis take the letter, and watched him read it under a street lamp.

The observer stood in the shadows watching the two Californians like a hawk.

"I'd give fifty dollars for that letter," he said to himself, as he watched Tunis read it. "By my life! if you keep it, Tunis, I'll have it, and don't you forget it!"

It did not take the man long to master the contents of the letter, for it was brief.

"That beats all," he said, looking up at the one who awaited him several steps away. "I never saw a person sign his name in figures afore. What do you think of it?"

"It's only a scare," was the answer. "Yer word comes from camp at a bad time, Tunis; but matters thar must be attended to. I'll go down with the boys."

"With all ov 'em?"

"No; I guess I'd better leave Silver Chick hyer ter look arter the man from San Diego."

"Who's that?"

"The galoot referred to in thet letter. I saw him registered at the Coast City Hotel as Noah Nelson not an hour ago. I'm sure I saw him this afternoon about the place—a medium-sized man with full beard and spectacles. Noah Nelson in a horn! That man is the Dakota tiger who's got it inter his head thet some ov the best men in California hev ter die ter satisfy him. I've been tracked before, Tunis; I've been hunted by Injuns an' Greasers from Mexico ter the British line, an' I tell you hyer thet no one man shall run me down just because he thinks—you know, Tunis. Do you think I'm goin' ter let him git ahead ov me?"

"I should reckon not. Hyer's yer letter."

"Keep it for a cigar lighter," was the answer.

"I don't value it a penny's worth. I'm one ov the galoots thet don't scare. You needn't go back with me, Tunis. Stay hyer an' help Silver Chick, ef he needs help. You know San Francisco like a book, tharfore you know Monte Merle's place."

"I could find it blindfolded."

"Then, you'll find Chick thar whenever you want him. I won't be gone long. By the eternal! I'll settle things in camp after a manner peculiarly my own. Keep your eyes open for the man with the double eyes and the full beard. He is the worst enemy we ever had, Tunis. Good-night now. Take care ov number one."

Tunis stood alone in the light of the street lamp, but not for long.

When he moved off he had a follower, a man who had penetrating gray eyes and no beard.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but isn't your name Bob Burton?" suddenly said a voice at Tunis's ear.

"No, sir; I'm Tunis—that's all," and Tunis wheeled upon the new-comer with flashing eyes.

"Oh, I see now. But you're the image ov Bob Burton from Mohave; old friend ov mine, big, raw-boned, with a girl's heart under his shirt—capital fellow; thought you war Bob. Pardon me, sir: come in an' have something."

The invitation struck Tunis, and a minute later he was looking into the bottom of a glass with the stranger at his side.

"Just from camp, eh?" asked the spectacled man.

"Yes."

"How's my friend Red Roy getting along?"

"He's playin' meanness down thar. Wait till the cap'n puts in; then by George! Reddy an' his pards'll talk no more about mutiny."

"Let me see: The camp's in the same old place, eh? Down—"

"Yes, at the forks ov the Merced—same old place," said Tunis.

The gray eyes glittered behind the gold spectacles with intense satisfaction.

They saw more than Tunis and the glass he held; they saw the piece of paper that peeped from his pocket.

All at once Tunis's attention was called to a man who stood at the end of the counter.

The man in spectacles thought he was an old acquaintance, but Tunis didn't know him.

Ten minutes later the two men separated with mutual good wishes.

Tunis said to himself that he would go to Monte Merle's and find Silver Chick, while his late companion pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and read:

"OREGON NOLL:—Beware! The Dakota tiger is in 'Frisco. He intends to use teeth and claws on you and your pards when he ferrets you out. Time has not dulled his claws. Beware! 4-11-21."

CHAPTER II.

AT MONTE MERLE'S.

THE place called and well known as Monte Merle's, was a retired gambling-resort, and was situated on one of the quiet streets of San Francisco.

The building itself was an imposing house of three stories and looked exteriorly like a private dwelling.

At the date of our story it was in a flourishing condition; large sums were nightly lost and won over the tables behind its doors, and men who went in flush came out paupers.

Monte Merle himself was a small, Frenchified looking man, who wore the Napoleon mustache and goatee, which he kept well waxed and pointed.

He was always scrupulously attired in close-fitting garments of elegant texture, and his insinuating smile had lured more than one man to his doom.

It was openly whispered that Monte Merle was a man with an eventful history back of him, and no one who ever heard the whisperings disbelieved them.

He had a smile for all his callers; few had ever caught him in a passion, though it was said that there was more tiger in his nature than looked out of his eyes.

It was to this place that the man called Tunis resolved to go after leaving Oregon Noll on the streets of 'Frisco.

No man who had ever come to the city from the gold-fields with gold in his belt had found it hard to find Monte Merle's.

There was always some evil genius of fortune to direct his steps to the place, and in nine cases out of every ten that evil genius was soundly cursed after the play.

I shall not say that men were boldly robbed at the gilded den, but it was current among gamblers in the city that not all the games played there were conducted "on the square."

Let us go back in our story a little ways and enter the resort of the green-cloth tiger in advance of Tunis.

The lamps are already lit, revealing the inside splendors of the place, the elegant carpet that covers the floor, the really fine paintings on the walls, the frescoed ceilings, and in one room the finest bar in the City of the Golden Gate.

The most elaborate gambling-room, the faro quarters, were on the second floor, above it were the roulette boards, the keno room, and stalls for small card-parties.

The first floor of Monte Merle's place was more of a reception-room than a play-house, and here it was, from a place where he was concealed himself, the proprietor could study the faces and purses of his visitors.

About the time that Tunis was on the last square on his way to the gaming-palace, a man entered the faro rooms and walked to one of the tables where he stationed himself at the side of a player and began to look on.

This man was Silver Chick, the person mentioned on the street by Oregon Noll, and the man, also, whom he thought of detailing to watch Noah Nelson from San Diego.

He was still young, but it was not difficult to see that, despite his new clothes, he had seen more of mountain than city life, and that he knew more of the revolver than etiquette in social circles.

The only adornment of his dark face was a heavy black mustache; his eyes were like it in color, dark as the raven's wing, and he wore his black hair long.

He stood like a statue at the table, and watched the game with a sport's interest.

In a minute he had found out who were winning and who losing, and this discovery added zest to his watchfulness.

Nobody appeared to see him; the silent gamblers played on as if he were a thousand miles away; only the eyes of the dealer, raised now and then, saw the handsome figure of Silver Chick.

Suddenly one of the gamblers pushed his chair back with a curse that sounded strangely, because it broke the silence of the place.

"I can go back and play with the pick once more," he growled. "Like an infernal fool, I got it into my head that I could buck ag'in' the monte demons of 'Frisco. What a fool I am! Good-night, gentlemen."

Some of the players nodded and a few said good-night, but never looked up, and the broken sport walked off, brushing Silver Chick as he passed by.

The sleek banker looked up at the motionless spectator, and then looked at the chair just vacated.

He did not ask Silver Chick to play, but the invitation was instantly understood.

As the chair was near by, the mountain sport had but to move forward a step and occupy it, which he did.

The next moment he had bought one hundred dollars' worth of chips, and was fighting the tiger of the gold coast.

From the very first he won, and in less than ten minutes he had won three times and doubled sums at that.

Men began to look at him, but he never moved; he staked again and again, and always won.

Was he going to break the bank?

In the midst of his astonishing success there came into the room a man who had just ascended the stairs from the first floor.

"Mebbe I'll find 'in hyer," muttered this individual who was not as well dressed as the men at the faro table. "Oregon said I'd find him at Monte Merle's, an' this is the place. Aha! thar he is, ther handsome devil—fixed up in broad-cloth, an' winnin' as usual."

Need we say that the speaker was Tunis?

He walked to Silver Chick's chair, and, standing behind it, looked down over his shoulders at his winnings.

It was a sight to gladden Tunis's eyes; it made them glisten, and he resolved not to disturb Silver Chick while the run of luck was on.

He stood there and watched for twenty minutes.

The unprecedented success continued, but at length Silver Chick with a smile pushed his pyramid of valuable chips across the table.

"Do you quit, sir?" asked the banker.

"I guess so," was the answer in a nonchalant manner.

"By George! you've made big money!"

Silver Chick looked up, and his eyes met those of Tunis.

"What! you in 'Frisco?" he exclaimed. "I thought we left you in camp."

"So you did, Silver; but I'm hyer at present."

"Anything off thar?"

"Kinder."

Silver Chick waited till he had been paid in a draft on Monte Merle's private purse, and then left his chair.

A moment later he had led Tunis into a private room on the right, the door of which he shut behind them.

"Now, tell me," was all he said, but he spoke in tones of command which was enough.

"It's all on Red Roy's account," said Tunis; "but Oregon Noll will settle him an' his chicks. He's off for camp afore this—"

"Gone?—the captain?" interrupted Silver Chick.

"I think so. He said he'd go an' suppress Reddy in a manner thet'd surprise him. He told me I'd find you hyer an' thet I should remain behind an' help you take keer ov the Dakota Tiger thet's come to town."

"Who?"

"Don't you know?" asked Tunis, looking strangely into Silver Chick's eyes. "I've got a letter hyer in my pocket thet'll explain a good deal. Somebody what signs his name in figures sent it ter Oregon."

"Let me have it."

Tunis dived into his pocket in which he had deposited the warning letter a short time before, but it was not there!

"You've lost it!" cried Silver Chick, his eyes suddenly flashing up.

"No; I've got it somewhar about my anatomy—I'm sure I hev," was the reply. "Besides, what would I lose it for? Thet's what I'd like ter know."

Silver Chick stood impatiently by while Tunis went through his clothes, pocket by pocket, but always with the same result.

"Darn me, ef I hedn't it awhile ago," he said, forced to look into the sport's face at last, and admit the truth of the accusation that he had lost the important letter. "I thought I'd show it to you, fer mebbe you could make it all out—thet is, mebbe git at the writer by the figure signature at the bottom. Say?"

A brilliant idea seemed to light up Tunis's eyes.

"Well, what now?"

"I'll bet my teeth thet I kin go back over the ground an' find thet very letter."

"Over the streets?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense! You're a fool for losin' it, but I'm not goin' ter growl now. When did Oregon Noll start for camp?"

"He went ter hunt up ther rest ov ther boys—all but you, Chick."

"An' he said he'd leave me behind ter take care ov the Dakota Tiger, eh?"

"Thet's what he intimated."

"Whar did he see this man?"

"At the Coast City Hotel; first he saw his name on the register thar, then, I think he saw ther galoot himself."

"What's he like?—did he say?"

"He said he war a megium-sized man, with full beard an' spectacles, an' the name on ther book war Noah Nelson, from San Diego."

"Thet's a starter," said Silver Chick, quietly. "Noah Nelson, eh? megium-sized man, with full beard an' spectacles."

"Thet's what Noll said."

"All right. We'll watch him, or at least I will."

"I'm in on ther watch, too, Silver," said Tunis, quickly.

"You? I don't know about trustin' a man who'd lose a letter."

"I'll never do it ag'in! Truth is, Silver, I run ag'in' a man who mistook me for some hustler from Mohave, an' he poured several straight thunderbolts inter me without stoppin'."

"Mebbe thet man stole the letter."

"Ten chances ter one thet he did! I'm ready ter swear now thet I didn't lose it. I'll not leave 'Frisco till I've found thet liberal-hearted cuss, an' punched him inter ther middle ov next week. Me from Mohave? Ye'r' right Silver; thet cool liar gobbled in thet letter. I recollect thet he wore specs."

"Thunders!" ejaculated Silver Chick. "An' a full beard, too, I suppose?"

"He hadn't any such thing thet I could see, an' he didn't look much like a tiger from Dakota, nor anywhar else."

"The man wants watching—I'll bet my fortune on it!" said Silver Chick. "Come with me. He won't come hyer, so we've got ter go on the hunt ov him. If I'm left behind for work, ter work I go with no hangin' back."

He opened the door of the private room and stepped out into the gambling apartment, followed by Tunis.

Silver Chick threw a hasty glance through the room, and then went to the stairs.

"I must first get at who this Dakota sharp is," he said to himself. "It's very strange that Noll didn't stay long enough to tell me something. I know of only one man from that quarter of the world who'd come to 'Frisco for our blood, an' he doesn't know whar we ar'. Thar's some mystery hyer. By heavens! I could choke the galoot behind me for losin' thet letter!"

He reached the floor below and was about to turn into the elegant bar-room to take a parting drink, when a hand from behind closed suddenly

on his arm, and he heard the voice of Tunis at his ear.

"For God's sake, Silver, look at ther man takin' in thet mountain picter—over yer right shoulder!"

Silver Chick had been halted by the clutch, and his eyes wandered instantly in the direction indicated by Tunis's voice.

He saw a man standing before one of the several fine paintings that adorned the walls of the room, but the person's back was turned toward him.

"Thet's ther man what thought I war ther galoot from Mohave," continued Tunis.

"Hev you seen his face?"

"No; but I know him without a front view. Thet's ther chap, I tell yer. He's got nary letter somewhar on his person. What a fool he war ter foller me hyer! He yields up thet stolen dockument, Silver, or he never leaves Monte Merle's alive!"

The stranger appeared to be absorbed in the picture which was a well painted piece of wild mountain scenery—a high walled gulch in the foreground, and the figure of a human being—some lynchcr's victim—swinging from a crag!

"Mebbe he's seen thet place somewhar in his travels," said Tunis, in a whisper.

"Perhaps," answered Silver Chick, turning away. "Tunis, your excitement has fixed suspicion on the wrong man, I guess."

"Never! I know them shoulders. By ther eternal, Silver, I'll prove thet I'm right!"

The next moment Tunis sprung across the carpet toward the stranger, and all at once his hand touched his arm.

"We meet again," said Tunis.

The man turned with a start, and said, in a voice that seemed to freeze the listener's blood:

"If you interrupt me again, I'll kill you in your boots!"

"Gods!" cried Tunis. "The wrong man!"

CHAPTER III.

CAGING THE TIGER.

"Just as I expected!" laughed Silver Chick, as Tunis came back to him white faced and with eyes almost starting from his head. "You stirred up the wrong lion, eh, Tunis, old boy?"

"Thet's ther way it looks, Chick; but, by George! I would hev sworn I had the galoot thet got the letter," was the reply. "He's just his size an' all thet, but he can't be ther same man. This feller doesn't wear specs, an' he's got an iron-gray mustache thet hides his mouth."

"So I noticed, Tunis. Hadn't we better invite him to tip glasses with us before we go?"

"Heavens, no! I've had enough ter do with him already. He threatened ter kill me in my boots, an' his blazin' eyes said thet he means business. No drinkin' with him in mine. He must hev taken a fancy ter thet picture."

Tunis drew back. He was glad to get away from the presence of the man whom he had roused, and who, instead of punishing him for his interference, had turned to the painting again.

Silver Chick gave the stranger a final glance as he and Tunis walked into Monte Merle's elegant bar-room, where they drank success to the hunt which Oregon Noll had imposed on the Chick.

"Now, Tunis, we'll look out for Noah Nelson," said Silver Chick, turning toward the door. "The captain can go to the camp an' deal with Red Roy an' his pards, but our work keeps us in 'Frisco. It won't be a long hunt, since the man from San Diego is at the Coast City Hotel. I'll size him up when I see him. Come!"

The twain passed from the gambling palace together, leaving the stranger still contemplating the picture which had struck his fancy.

"Don't I know that place?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Never will I forget the morning I entered that accursed gulch, and saw that body swinging there just as the artist has depicted it. Never mind, vultures of the Colorado! I will find you all. My trail ends where I pay the last of you back for bathing your beaks in the blood of one of the bravest and best men that ever lived."

He turned from the painting and stopped at the bar.

"Can you tell me who painted that canyon picture?" he inquired of the bartender.

"No, sir."

"Who sold it to Monte Merle?"

"I don't know that, either. It isn't for sale."

"Of course not. I don't want to buy it, but I was curious to know who the artist is, as the painting itself strikes me."

"It takes everybody that comes here. That body swinging from the crag was an after-thought."

"Ah?"

"It wasn't on the canvas three years ago."

"How was it put there?"

"Monte Merle was showing the pictures to a party ov players one day, and one ov 'em said thet he knew every inch ov thet canyon. It's somewhar along the Colorado, I b'lieve. Well, this gentleman went on to say thet he once saw a man hangin' from thet crag, an' told Monte thet ter hev the man painted just as he hung thar would add to the picture. Thet war enough, an' it appeared ter be a good idea, so

Monte sent for the painter and had the work completed. Every time that man comes hyer he takes a look at the man hangin' from the crag."

"He comes here, then?"

"Yes; just left a few minutes ago."

"Who is he?"

"They call him Silver Chick wherever he is known. I guess he never had any other name. He's got the coolest head in 'Frisco to-night."

"And he suggested the placing of the corpse swinging from the crag as it is represented in your painting?"

"Yes. Devilish fine picture that. Monte wouldn't part with it. It's the best one in the house. Have you ever seen the canyon?"

"Yes," grated the stranger, his eyes blazing like balls of fire as he spoke. "I know it too well. Where will I find Silver Chick?"

"I don't know where he stops, but he's everywhere. He makes 'Frisco howl when he comes up from the gold camps. He made our banker wince to-night. Luck always freezes to that cool head. He left awhile ago with a fellow who b'longs to the camp. If you want ter see the Chick, you'll pick him up on the street."

The stranger waited to hear no more. He seemed eager to quit the card palace, and having thanked the bartender for his information, and with a final glance at the painting he started for the street.

To all appearances Tunis had waked up the wrong man, for this individual wore no glasses, his face was dark, and a heavy mustache, thickly strewn with gray hairs, covered his mouth.

He started off at a lively gait when he reached the street, and his keen eyes from the first were on the lookout for Silver Chick and Tunis.

"Oregon Noll can go down and suppress Red Roy, but I will find this Chick," he said to himself. "And when I've found him he'll not go out of my sight again."

Meanwhile, the man he was looking for, with Tunis, had directed his steps toward the Coast City Hotel.

They reached it, and Silver Chick inspected the register, leaving Tunis at the door.

"Great Jehosaphat! thar's that man ag'in!" suddenly ejaculated Tunis. "Hang me! ef he isn't keepin' an eye on us. I'll notify the Chick!"

At this time Silver Chick had turned toward his pard, and the next moment the twain met.

"He's hyer ag'in, Silver."

"Who?"

"Thet man I stirred up at Monte Merle's."

"Whar is he?"

Silver Chick asked the question coolly, as he sent a glance toward the door.

"I saw 'im on the sidewalk in front a moment ago. He's watchin' us."

"I reckon not."

"Try him an' see. Walk out an' glance back occasionally. It'll test the matter."

"I'll do it, Tunis."

The speaker was about to leave the building, when a boy rushed inside and slipped a piece of paper in his hand.

It was the work of a second, and Silver Chick got only a glimpse of the urchin before he disappeared.

"Another warning," said the Chick to himself, as he walked into the adjoining bar-room, where he unfolded the paper. "By Jupiter! Tunis was not mistaken!"

The paper did contain a warning, and it was couched in three brief sentences hastily scribbled as follows:

"SILVER CHICK:—Be on your guard. A man of many disguises is now watching you. The Dakota Tiger is at your heels! 4-11-21."

The recipient of the note of warning crushed it in his hand with a mad oath and wheeled toward the spot where he had just left Tunis.

"Where is he?" he asked in tones that startled his companion.

"I saw him on the sidewalk a moment since," was the reply.

The two went to the door, and Silver Chick's keen eyes scrutinized every man in sight.

"He's not in sight now," he said disappointedly.

"Yes he is; look yonder," and Tunis's look called the Chick's attention to a man who was quietly lighting a cigar under the nearest lamp.

Silver Chick looked at the man for a moment and then said in low tones at Tunis's ear:

"That's the man; that's the Dakota Tiger. Now, Tunis, my boy, we must entrap him to-night. By the eternal stars! his hunt must end before another day dawns on 'Frisco."

The two pards watched the man until he had finished lighting his cigar.

He was the same man whom Tunis had disturbed while contemplating the painting at Monte Merle's, and Silver Chick got an excellent view of him while he stood under the street lamp.

"Come, now," continued the Chick. "He'll follow us, Tunis, but it will be to his doom. Now we understand one another. That note settled it."

"What note?"

"The one the boy thrust into my hand."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"And it was signed—"

"With figures."

"Great Jehosaphat! that's the way Oregon's warnin' war signed!" exclaimed Tunis. "It came from ther same person."

"I think so. We'll find out by-an'-by. But that man-tracker first. After all, we'll get to camp in time to see Oregon Noll deal with Red Roy an' his pards. Off we ar' now. Don't glance back too much. I'll do the watchin' for the hull hunt; you might give the thing away, you see."

"I'll try not ter, Chick. Don't I want ter settle with ther daisy who threatened ter kill me in my boots? Who is he, anyhow?"

"We'll get at that further on in the game," said Silver Chick. "I've got an idea, but I may be wrong. We'll wait an' test it."

The two pards moved up the well-lighted thoroughfare, and Silver Chick's keen eyes singled out the man who came after them with no apparent object in view.

He seemed to be enjoying both the starlight night and the fragrant cigar, but, in reality, as Silver Chick saw he was tracking them.

The man with the gray mustache was undoubtedly a human sleuth-hound, and he seemed confident of his prey from the cool manner in which he was conducting the hunt.

"Ar' yer goin' ter take 'im back ter Merle's?" inquired Tunis as his companion turned into a street which if followed a short distance would land them both at the doors of the gambling palace.

"Yes. Why not end his hunt there?"

"Oh, I'm not particular; only Monte Merle might object ter it."

Silver Chick laughed before he replied.

"I'll risk that, Tunis," he said. "You don't know Merle as I do."

"I'll admit thet, but think what a stir it'll make if you kill him thar."

"Who talks about killing?"

"Nobody, but I thought you said thet thet tracker's hunt should end afore mornin'."

"So I did, an' so it shall! Ah! he is still on the trail, Tunis! He's following us like an Injun. That man wants blood. Well, I'll gratify him, or my name's not Silver Chick."

A few minutes later the sleek desperado and his pard reached Monte Merle's place once more, and were admitted.

They were met in the room below by Monte Merle himself, black-eyed, and sleek-looking as usual.

Silver Chick took him to one side and said hastily and in low tones:

"The man who next rings your bell must never leave the palace alive!"

The reply was a start, and a deeply inquisitive look.

"I mean it," continued the Chick hastily. "He's not three minutes away. His death prolongs our existence. When I call him a man tiger from Dakota, I say enough to put you on your guard. Is the trap ready?"

"It is always ready," was the quick response.

"But I don't know about this discovery of yours."

"I do. Ah! there goes the bell! He comes! He must go down with the trap. Trust me. That man is a tiger. Receive him. My presence here would mar the scheme. Spring the trap!"

Silver Chick gave the proprietor of the gambling palace a final look and disappeared from the room just as the guardian of the door admitted the person who had rung.

As he passed out he touched Tunis and that worthy slipped away with him.

A minute later Monte Merle turned to behold standing before him the man who had just entered the house.

It was the stranger who had just tracked Silver Chick and Tunis through the streets of 'Frisco.

Monte Merle looked at him for a moment, and then addressed him with a suavity which had made him famous.

"You will find the gentlemen up-stairs," he said at the end of his welcome. "The games drag to-night, I am told, and they need a little excitement. But before you ascend, let me show you my latest purchase in art—a painting which has become famous."

The pair had already entered the room that contained the pictures, and Monte Merle conducted his visitor up to the canyon painting.

"There, sir," said the gambler; "that is said to be one of the finest paintings in the city. Step back to yon bunch of roses in the carpet and look at it from there. That is the *point de observation*, and from thence you can see all the wonderful beauties of the picture."

Without a word, the street sleuth obeyed the wave of the gambler's hand.

That painting seemed to possess a strange charm for him.

His back was turned to the sliding doors between which he had entered the room, and he neither saw nor heard them slip together as if propelled by some noiseless machinery.

Monte Merle's eyes suddenly glistened, and stepping to one side he pressed his right foot firmly upon the carpet.

The next second the floor gave way under the

feet of the visitor, and a startling cry arose from his lips.

He grasped madly at the carpet as he went down, but in vain, and he disappeared with a laugh of triumph in his ears!

Monte Merle did not move until the trap came back to its place, and the carpet again appeared one unbroken piece.

The sliding doors opened again to admit Silver Chick who came forward with victory's gleam in his eyes.

Three strides carried him to Merle's side.

"That was well done!" he exclaimed. "I guess I've carried out Noll's orders. The Dakota Tiger is caged forever! Now, I'm off for camp."

"But tell me who that man was," said Monte Merle, as his white fingers closed on the Chick's arm. "I don't know that I ever saw him before to-night."

"He wanted us both just the same. He's the brother of the man hangin' to the crag in that picture."

"Great God!" cried Monte Merle.

CHAPTER IV.

RED ROY.

LET us for a little while transport the reader from San Francisco to the gold region where the forks of one of California's most beautiful rivers take their rise.

It is deep in the celebrated Merced country where man is as wild as the scenery about him, where, when he is not digging into the mountains for yellow ore, he is gambling it away among the gold camps of the region.

Between the forks of the river just mentioned was, at the date of our romance of wild men and wilder deeds, a camp of good size.

It contained about forty rough but substantial cabins which gave shelter to the men who had come from the four quarters of the compass to get rich by some means in a short time.

The place was nothing more than a gold camp, yet some one had christened it Pistol City, and the name, as if appropriate, had clung to it from the first day of its existence.

Of course its denizens composed a hard crowd, made up as it was, from representations of a dozen States and Territories and from old Mexico, and even the Central American States.

The only race not permitted to cross the sacred precincts of Pistol City was the Mongolian, and the men of the Flowery Kingdom knew that their appearance in camp would be followed by a lynching.

Pistol City had prospered in a certain way.

That is, the mines were generous, and flush times had never left the gold camp.

It was near the close of a warm day when a man flung wide the door of a certain cabin in Pistol City, and stepped into the street.

There was nothing uncommon in this action, but there was a mad gleam in the depths of the man's eyes which told that something unusual was in the wind.

"Ef I don't hev my way for a time, shoot me for a Digger tramp!" he hissed. "With Oregon an' Silver Chick in 'Frisco, I oughter come out on top. Thet's just whar I'm goin' ter land—on top!"

He was a gold-camp giant, and his garments consisted of soft buckskin trowsers, a dark shirt, open at his throat, and an embroidered jacket, open all the way down.

His feet were incased in boots whose tops almost touched his knees, and his hat was a wide-brimmed one, like those met everywhere along the Texas border.

The skin of this ill-humored fellow was swarthy almost to darkness, his eyes were black and piercing, like the eagle's, and he wore his thick hair long, after the manner of Western sports.

Not a semblance of hair was seen on his face, which was as smooth as a child's.

This man the whole camp knew.

He was called Red Roy from the fact that the embroidery of his jacket was red, and it would not be saying too much to remark that his nature, when aroused, partook of the same temperament.

We have already written his name.

The reader will recollect that Tunis brought to Oregon Noll, on the streets of San Francisco, a report that Red Roy was "stirring things up" in the gold camp, and that Oregon Noll determined at once to leave the city to suppress him in a summary manner.

It was the second night after the one that witnessed the events recorded in our first three chapters that Red Roy left the miner's cabin with flashing eyes as has just been mentioned.

He had already thrown the camp into a *furor*, and on this account Tunis had mounted the best horse and galloped toward 'Frisco.

Having left his shanty, Red Roy stood for a few moments in the wide street of the camp, with the last light of the setting sun falling on his splendid figure.

He looked like the monarch of the place, the chief lion of the mountain den.

"Some ov 'em hev known for a long time what I've just found out!" he went on, speaking

scarcely above his breath. "All along I've considered Karl, the Kid, a good-lookin' boy, an' it never popped inter my head till ther other night thet he war no boy at all. I see now thet I flared up too quick. I should hev took things cooler, but thet's just the way with me—I go off half-cocked, an' just when I should play a steady trigger. Don't I know thet Tunis, the captain's spy, left Pistol City ter warn Noll an' pards in 'Frisco thet I've discovered the truth about Karl, the Kid? Don't I know thet they've run the girl off somewhar ter keep 'er out o' my sight till ther hull layout's got back ter camp? I'm no fool, Oregon Noll, ef I do act hasty when I oughter keep cool. Come from 'Frisco; yes, come back with Silver Chick an' the rest ov yer gang. I'm hyer, an' by the eternal heavens! I stand my ground! They threw inter my teeth t'other night thet I've been a disturbin' element ever since I first sot foot in Pistol City. Mebbe I hev, an' I'm likely ter remain such, much ter yer discomfort, Captain Noll!"

The gold-camp giant walked down the mountain street as he concluded, with keen eyes that saw everything.

He seemed to know that his startling discovery had suddenly transformed him into an Ishmaelite, and that against him every hand in camp had been lifted.

He knew that Tunis had gone to San Francisco with startling news for Oregon Noll, yet, he had not left Pistol City.

He knew that the messenger's tidings would bring back to camp some of the most desperate men who had ever ruled with iron hand in the land of gold.

Still, he stood his ground, like a man who had resolved to die with his boots on.

The sun, as it disappeared behind the mountain, saw Red Roy halt in front of a cabin a little smaller than its neighbors.

The next moment his hand struck the door and a voice from the inside said:

"Come in."

The giant did not hesitate, but with a quick but scrutinizing glance over his shoulder, lifted the wooden latch and entered.

A low cry of surprise fell upon his ear as he closed the door behind him, and he saw at once the party who had spoken.

The tin lamp that burned on a rough table near the center of the room showed him the figure of a youth of seventeen stretched on a cot on the floor.

The eyes of the boy were unnaturally bright, and they remained fixed on Red Roy from the moment he entered the cabin till he dropped upon the three-legged stool beside the cot.

"You warn't lookin' for me, I reckon," said the giant, with a smile at the corners of his mouth. "I've a habit ov turnin' up whar I'm not wanted. How an' ye, Marmoset?"

"Oh, I'll get up in a day or two," was the answer. "I can feel the old strength comin' back all the time. Who said I didn't want you to come, Roy?"

"Nobody just said so, but I took it for granted, seein' thet Pistol City an' me hev hed a time within ther last few days. They've told ye, Marmoset?"

"Yes; they told me something about it," said the boy.

"Who did?"

"Doctor Pablo."

"That infernal Mexica be hangin' from some limb in his native land if he had his deserts?" hissed Red Roy, and his hands shut madly as he spoke.

"Why, he's curin' me," laughed the boy. "You shouldn't be so hard on Doctor Pablo, Roy."

"I know the Mexican cat. It's a wonder he hasn't given you a death dose, Marmoset. By Jove! ef I war under his care, I'd prepare ter waltz through ther portals ov eternity. My advice, boy, is ter git out ov his hands as soon as possible. Doctor Pablo, eh? His name should be Doctor Satan."

"You are severe on him; that's a fact," said the boy on the cot. "But tell me what did happen that put the men of Pistol City against you. We're alone here, Roy."

The giant bent lower, and looked into the youth's face a full minute before he spoke again. "What did that Mexican say had happened?" he asked.

"He said they caught you cheating at cards."

"The yaller liar!" cried Red Roy. "Thet confirms all my suspicions. He war afraid ter give you ther true layout, Marmoset, and he had ter crawl up ter ye like a snake with a lie on his tongue!"

"Well, what did happen?"

The boy was eager for Red Roy's reply.

"I made a diskivery—thet's what the hull thing started from—thet's what made Tunis, the spy, saddle the best hoss in camp, an' break for 'Frisco."

"A diskivery?" echoed Marmoset. "Have you found another rich lead?"

"Yes, but it doesn't yield gold," answered Red Roy.

"What, then?"

"I fancy thet you know as much about it as I do, Marmoset, for I don't claim ter hev sharper eyes than yers. I've found out thet the youngest we call Karl the Kid is a girl."

For a minute Marmoset did not make a reply of any kind.

The revelation seemed to have taken his breath, and he fell back on the panther-skin pillow of the cot, and stared into bronze face of the gold-camp giant.

"Kinder took yer breath, I see," smiled Red Roy, still looking down upon the boy. "I didn't mean ter do it, Marmoset. It kinder took mine when I made ther diskivery. I'd bet my last ounce thet I'm right, an' when I foolishly proclaimed my find at ther Cold Deck Saloon, I saw thet I hed ther hull camp ag'in' me. I offered ter back my statement with dust er pistols, just as suited ther fancy, but I warn't taken. For awhile it looked as though we'd press triggers an' make another night in the history ov Pistol City; but thar warn't a drop ov blood spilled. Look hyer, Marmoset. Can it be thet you an' I hev lived hyer fer years without suspectin' thet Karl, the Kid, war a girl?"

"It seems incredible, Roy," said the boy, his eyes still filled with astonishment. "I've read about such things in novels, but I never believed thet they ever happened. Karl, a girl?"

"Thet's just whar you hit it. Look back, now. You know how Oregon Noll has watched the Kid all along; you hev seen him watchin' her cabin long arter dark. Put this an' thet together now, an' tell me, if you kin, thet it doesn't look suspicious—thet it all doesn't confirm my suspicions."

"It does, by my soul!" suddenly exclaimed the occupant of the cot. "Where is Karl?"

"Thet's what I'd like ter know. They've taken her off; they don't want me ter see her ag'in till Noll an' Silver Chick git hyer."

"When do you look for them?"

"They're liable ter turn up at any moment from this time on. Ef I hed known sooner thet Tunis had set out for 'Frisco, hang me for a rattler if he'd ever got thar! I found it out too late ter intercept ther gold-camp spy. Marmoset," continued Red Roy, before the boy could put in a word, "you an' I hev never been pards. You always seem ter take but little stock in me—I don't know why. Mebbe it's because I'm a big, dark-faced feller, who never took ter you. Now, I'm goin' ter say thet I don't want ter fight this hull camp, an' I don't intend ter fight you. I came hyer ter ask you if you knew anything about our Kid, as a girl, but I've already diskivered thet you don't. You don't know whar they've taken her, either. Doctor Pablo tried ter set ye on ther wrong track, but I've got yer back. Suthin's goin' ter happen. I warn the Mexican liar ter keep beyond my hands. He's got ther kind ov throat thet fits my fingers."

Red Roy straightened with a laugh as he finished, and his figure stood upright in the lamp-light.

"Are you going to follow up your discovery?" asked the boy from the cot. "Are you going to find out who she is?"

"Yes!" snapped the giant. "I know thet I'll hev ther hull camp ag'in' me if I do—I've got thet now. Mebbe it's none ov Red Roy's business, but he'll make it his afore ther game's played half through."

"I will help you when I get up!" cried Marmoset. "You sha'n't have everybody against you. I'll be your friend."

Instantly the desperado stooped, and his big hand quickly swallowed up the little one the boy thrust forward to meet it.

"I accept yer friendship ef ye ar' a boy!" he exclaimed; "an' let me tell yer, Marmoset, thet we'll git ter ther end ov this affair either dead or alive!"

"Dead or alive!" echoed Marmoset with a laugh that betokened bravery. "You and I will get there, Roy."

"Bet yer head!" cried the giant, as he dropped the boy's hand with a final pressure. "When they stir me up they rouse the boss hyena ov this menagerie. I guess I'll go now. It must be time for Oregon Noll an' his monte bank-breakers ter git in from 'Frisco. Then, let 'em tread on this hyena's tail ef they dare!"

He started toward the door with a last look at the boy as he shot out the concluding sentence, but stopped as he laid his fingers on the latch.

"Watch thet Mexican doctor, I say," he said in warning tones. "He kills more than he cures. Don't take another drop ov his medicine, but pour it out by doses on the ground."

"I'll take your advice, Roy," was the reply which made the giant's eyes glisten.

The wooden latch was raised with a dull click and the door opened.

"Good-night, Marmoset," said Red Roy. "I'll hev news ov some kind fer ye afore mornin'. They can't baffle this mountain rooster long—Great God!"

The gold-camp giant uttered this startling exclamation as he staggered back toward the door he had just left.

"Hands up, Red Roy, or drop dead in yer boots!" said a stern voice. "We've got the dead drop on ye, an' we're goin' ter show yer thet one man can't run this paradise!"

Red Roy was covered by a dozen revolvers, and the merciless speaker was Oregon Noll, fresh from San Francisco!

CHAPTER V.

IN SATAN'S HOTEL.

THE man was well backed by the fellows who flanked him.

He had thrust two arms toward Red Roy, and at the end of each was a cocked revolver.

The camp giant could look between the weapons and into eyes that sparkled like the basilisk's and seemed entirely devoid of mercy.

It was a strange, wild tableau for the full moon that showered a flood of silvery light upon the scene.

While Red Roy expected Oregon Noll, as we have heard him remark, he was taken by surprise, completely so, and that before he had time to lift a hand or cock a weapon.

His fine figure seemed to increase an inch in stature while he looked into the faces that confronted him.

They might confront the giant with a score of revolvers, they might proclaim his doom in harsh tones, but they could not scare him.

Red Roy was one of the fearless ones.

"So you think you've made a diskivery, eh?" suddenly ejaculated Oregon Noll. "Don't you know, Reddy, thet some things one hed best keep ter himself especially in Pistol City?"

"Thet may be so, Oregon, but I'm my own jedge in some things," was the prompt answer clearly spoken. "I never thought, till t'other night thet Karl, the Kid, war other than the boy I've always b'lieved him."

Oregon Noll threw a hasty glance at his backers before he replied:

"Men don't always diskiver the truth," he said in a bantering manner.

"But I hev, an' no man knows it better than Oregon Noll," said Red Roy, looking the captain of the camp unflinchingly in the eye. "An' because I found it out they've toted the girl off. Afraid I'd steal her, warn't ye?"

The last sentence was addressed to the crowd who backed the man just from 'Frisco.

There was no answer, but the eyes of the gold pards looked triumph into Roy's face.

"It's no matter what they thought; they did right," said Noll. "You hed ter nose around till yer let out ther only secret Pistol City ever had. I heard ov yer doin's in 'Frisco—"

"Yes, an' if I could hev intercepted yer messenger, ye'd be thar now, Captain Noll!"

"Ah! You ar' determined ter show yer teeth to ther end, I see."

"To ther end!" flashed Roy.

All this time, in the cabin behind him, lay the boy with his body bent forward, and his ears drinking in every word.

The door seemed to be half an inch ajar, and not a syllable was escaping him.

"If I was strong enough, only for five minutes!" he ejaculated. "Red Roy is my friend, and he's right in this matter. I thank him for his discovery, but I do not see why I didn't find it out before. Touch Roy to draw his blood, Oregon Noll, and one of these days perhaps you'll have Marmoset against you."

"Come! we'll transfer the rest ov this play ter other quarters," suddenly said Oregon Noll. "You kin drop yer hands now, Reddy. Surround him quietly, boys, an' keep both eyes on the prisoner. I hev'n't come back from 'Frisco for nothin'."

Captain Noll's commands were promptly obeyed, and Red Roy was the prisoner of the very men with whom he had lately been on the best of terms.

"March!"

"Which way, cap'n?" asked a member of the group.

"Toward Satan's Hotel! Forward!"

The guard started off, glancing significantly at Red Roy as the advance was begun.

The manner in which Oregon Noll spoke the destination was intended to have an effect on the prisoner, but he did not quail.

"In the name of Heaven, what are they going to do with him at Satan's Hotel?" cried the boy in the hut. "Oregon Noll is going to pay Reddy in some terrible manner for his discovery; he is going to inflict some awful punishment. And the men will stand by him; they will do his bidding, for they are under his thumb."

The tramp of the Californians had already died away, but the silence seemed to nerve the sick boy to extra exertion.

"Not while I live shall they make their triumph complete to-night!" he exclaimed.

He crept from the couch and got into a pair of pantaloons that hung from a wooden peg driven into the wall.

"Red Roy won't squeal; he'll go to his doom with the grit of a Pawnee chief," he went on as he dressed himself. "Let my strength continue for one hour! I'll ask no more. They may turn on me, the gold-camp vipers; but I don't care. After all, Reddy's the best man in Pistol City."

The boy hurried up his toilet as rapidly as he could, for he was working against time.

"Now let me see what they are going to do," he exclaimed, moving toward the door. "Ah! how fresh the air is! This is better than your drugs, Doctor Pablo."

He had thrown wide the door and stood on the threshold drinking in the cool, sweet air that came from the mountains.

When he started forward he discovered that he had overtaxed his strength, for he staggered backward, but clutched the rough jamb and tried to steady himself.

"I will go!" he cried. "I will help Red Roy when he needs help! I will take a hand—in the game! Oh, Heaven!"

That was all; the giddiness that tore his hands loose caused him to reel away, and all at once he fell senseless upon the couch he had just left.

The door, wide open now, admitted the soft moonlight, and it bathed the whitened face of Marmoset in a beauty that was weird and entrancing.

He had failed at the threshold of succor!

If he had held out, what could he have done for Red Roy against Oregon Noll and his pards? Meanwhile, the captain of the gold camp was approaching the place called Satan's Hotel.

The camp had been left behind, and the band was midway between it and the foot of the nearest mountain.

Satan's Hotel was not a structure of any kind made by human hands. It existed long before a gold-hunter's pick sounded among the mountains of the Merced country.

It was simply a dark, yawning chasm in the ground, a terrible black pit about ten feet across and, legend said, bottomless.

Silver Chick, at that moment in San Francisco, had tried to fathom it at the end of many united lassoes, but the experiment had proved a failure.

A stone thrown into it was not heard to drop, although several miners had fancied that the experiment had, after a long interval, been succeeded by the splash of water.

But this was all conjecture, and Satan's Hotel came to be regarded as another name for the bottomless pit.

No noxious vapors arose from the place, no odors of any kind; it was simply a mystery of nature—a deep, dark, unfathomable hole, like the entrance to some Stygian horror.

It was on the brink of Satan's Hotel that Oregon Noll halted with his captive.

During the march to the place the gold-camp roughs had tied his hands upon his back and deprived him of the revolvers under his embroidered jacket.

Ten feet from the pit stood a tree, the only one near by, but its limbs did not overhang the gap.

"We're goin' ter invest ye with an honor heretofore denied all citizens ov Pistol City," said Noll, addressing Red Roy. "You ar' goin' ter find ther cellar ov Satan's Hotel. This folers yer discovery, Reddy, an' I hope you'll report the exact depth ov the infernal place *when you git back!*"

There was a tinge of merciless cruelty in Captain Noll's tones. It made his eyes glitter, and drew sarcastic smiles to the faces of the men who heard.

"All right!" said Red Roy. "You've got ther upper hand this time, Oregon Noll, but you find no kicker in yer hands. Time will tell who Karl the Kid is, an' the days will fetch vengeance. I'm no baby. If you expect Red Roy, yer better in every respect, ter ask for mercy, you'll be disappointed. Whar's thet other pard what never liked me?—whar's Silver Chick?"

"I left him in 'Frisco ter keep eyes on a certain man who's playin' detective," was the reply. "I wish he was hyer. I knew he never liked you, Reddy. Any message for him?"

"No—yes! Tell him when you see him—no! I'll not send him a message!" and Red Roy suddenly sealed his lips, and threw a fearless glance down the pit on whose brink he stood.

"Very well; suit yerself," said Oregon Noll with a laugh. "I should hev been happy ter bear yer last message ter Silver Chick, but ef ye won't send it, why, thet's ther end ov it. As ter Karl the Kid, Reddy, don't let that individual trouble you. Man, if you had not made thet *unfortunate* diskivery, you'd not be standin' at ther door ov Satan's Hotel. I'm sorry for ye, Reddy; we all ar'."

This was the quintessence of sarcasm, and it brought a deeper, fiercer flash to Red Roy's eyes, nothing more.

In less than five minutes a rope had been passed around the body of the doomed man under his arms, and thence extended to the tree, which it was made to encircle about ten inches from the ground.

There was slack enough to the rope to admit of the lowering of Red Roy into the opening, for this was undoubtedly the intention of his executioners.

"This is the programme, Reddy," said Oregon Noll when the rope had been secured to the tree. "We ar' goin' ter lower ye into Satan's Hotel. When the rope has been stretched tight, I shall light this candle which I hold in my hand an' place it under the cord at the tree. Ther blaze will burn the rope slowly through, an' yer weight will cause you ter drop suddenly, swiftly to—God knows whar! We'll set the candle, Reddy, an' then turn our backs on yer forever! An' while we drink ter success at Roxy Hawk's, the candle'll be eatin' thread by thread the rope ov death. Lower him into ther hotel, pards."

Did Red Roy shout defiance into the teeth of his persecutor?

No.

Did he beg for mercy in the face of the most terrible doom ever confronted by man?

Red Roy was no suppliant.

He made no resistance when strong arms seized him to lower him over the abyss; as if he knew that resistance would have been in vain, or as if he had resolved to die and make no sign.

The lowering into the chasm did not occupy three minutes, and Red Roy slid from the hands of the pards into the darkness!

When the rope became stretched he was hanging along the wall of the natural shaft, his head ten feet below the top.

At a wave of Oregon Noll's hand, the silent men drew back from the brink.

The next moment was heard the crack of a lucifer, and a tiny flame was seen at the ends of Captain Noll's fingers.

Then the desperado lit his candle, and held it insultingly over the hole.

He glanced down for a second, but saw in that brief space of time the glaring eyeballs, the close-set teeth, and the calm face of Red Roy, his eternal foe.

"Good-by, Reddy!" he shouted. "If any more men cross my path in Pistol City, I'll send 'em down ter keep ye company!" And with the last word he walked toward the tree, the candle burning brightly in his hand.

The wild men who watched him saw him stoop over the rope and fix the candle in the ground directly under it.

The apex of the flame just singed the rope, but that was enough.

Oregon Noll knew that a few minutes of its burning would hurl Red Roy to doom.

When he straightened and turned toward the breathless group again, his eyes spoke the desperado's triumph.

"Thus perish all the foes of Pistol City!" he said. "Let this be a warnin' to those who hunt secrets for a livin'!"

He glanced over his shoulder at the candle doing its work under the rope, and the following moment was once more at the head of Pistol City's tongs.

"We'll sample Holy Hank's whiskies," he said, catching a man's arm; "an' then you may tell me whar ye hid the girl."

"All right, captain. We had ter hide her from Red Roy an' she's whar she knows nothin' ov this."

"Thanks, Brown Kit. We've rid ourselves ov a bad man ter-night, an' Silver Chick is doin' some good work also in 'Frisco. Pit Pistol City ag'in' the world, an' creation'll lose every time!"

The entire crowd by this time had turned their backs on the work of their desperate leader.

"Halt!" suddenly cried Oregon Noll. "I forgot one thing. Three cheers for the camp's victory ter-night. Off with yer hats. Let Red Roy hear the Pistol City yell for the last time."

Every hat was doffed as Oregon Noll's sombrero was lifted in mid-air by his dark right hand, and three tremendous cheers were given with a will.

"Now for Holy Hank's! Come! The last man there treats ther crowd!"

There was another cry and a rush forward, and soon the men of the gold camp were running like mad, as if their lives depended on their reaching a certain place within a certain time.

And Red Roy was left swinging in mid-air, with a candle burning his life away!

CHAPTER VI.

THE LETTER FROM 'FRISCO.

EXACTLY one hour later a man approached the tree that stood in the vicinity of Satan's Hotel and struck a lucifer which he took from his pocket.

The light thus produced revealed the face and figure of Oregon Noll, and his dark eyes snapped with triumph as he stooped to examine the candle's work.

The candle itself was out, as if when the rope snapped, it had been extinguished.

It still stood upright in the little pile of earth at the foot of the tree, but to all appearances it had accomplished its purpose.

A piece of rope with a blackened end still encircled the trunk of the tree, and told in mute language the story of Red Roy's terrible doom.

"That's what he gets for huntin' up a secret," muttered Oregon Noll, while he inspected the burnt rope. "He's an unexpected guest now at Satan's Hotel, an' is liable ter occupy his present quarters for an indefinite period. If I don't run this mountain shebang, I'll know why. Now, if Silver Chick has accomplished his work in 'Frisco, we'll be all right an' things will move along in first class order in Pistol City. Hello!—doctor!"

The boss of the California camp had started erect at the sound of a footstep, and rising suddenly had turned to find himself face to face with the Mexican known as Doctor Pablo.

This individual was a man of about thirty-five, of medium height, wiry and agile, with the blackest eyes, and the yellowish skin of his people.

Cunning and natural villainy sometimes peeped from under his black lashes, though, it was said that those very eyes could, at their possessor's bidding, look as meek as a kitten's.

Doctor Pablo was a veritable fox of the human species.

"Rope burn off, eh?" he asked Oregon Noll as he sent a glance toward the foot of the tree which he could see by the aid of the match that still burned in Noll's hands.

"Yes, an' Red Roy has gone to the secret hunter's doom, confound him! I tell you, doctor, that's the way I manage such fellows. When it is too late, they diskiver that it won't do ter fool with this gold scorpion. My sting is death; do you hear me doctor?—death!"

Oregon Noll leaned toward the Mexican and hissed the last word into the doctor's teeth.

He meant what he said; nobody could cross him with impunity.

"How's yer patient?" continued Noll before Doctor Pablo could reply. "I hear that the boy's been sick for several days."

"Patient run off," was the answer.

"Since when?" cried Oregon Noll.

"He was certainly in the shanty when we pounced upon Red Roy an' corraled him?"

"I think he was, but he wasn't there ten minutes ago."

"The deuce! Doctor, you must watch your patients better than this. They don't often serve you this trick, do they?"

"No!" grated the Mexican doctor, his eyes snapping madly as he gave utterance to the monosyllable. "If I get another dose down the baby, senor, he'll not give Doctor Pablo the slip again."

Oregon Noll instantly understood the dark meaning of the last sentence.

"Don't do that, doctor," he said, with a smile, as he clutched the Mexican's arm.

"He might bite you some time, Captain Noll."

"That youngster?"

"Si, senor."

"I'll take the risk, doctor," laughed the boss of Pistol City. "When I grow afraid of a young kid like Marmoset, I'll call on you for one of your famou sleepin'-potions. Ar' you goin' ter hunt for your patient?"

"I'm lookin' for him now," said Doctor Pablo. "You are certain, captain, that Senor Roy reached the bottom of Satan's Hotel?"

"Look at that rope!" cried Noll, pointing toward the root of the tree. "Thet tells the story as no human bein' could tell it. Dead, doctor? From the depths ov thet pit thar's no escape. Red Roy got death for his secret-hunt."

Doctor Pablo moved from Oregon Noll's side without a reply, and leaned over the brink of the yawning pit whose blackness the moonlight could not dissipate.

He listened there for several minutes, watched by Captain Noll, who stood near by.

"I guess he tumbled through ter China," laughed Noll, as the Mexican turned from the pit. "Jehosaphat! what a pitch it war!"

Doctor Pablo stepped back and looked at Oregon Noll with a grin.

"I'll find the boy, now," he said. "Did Senor Kit tell you where they hid the girl?"

"Yes; I know her whereabouts an' will see her presently. But look hyer, doctor. Mind you, I don't want that boy dosed with any ov yer black medicines. He'll hurt no one. I'll take all risks, I say. A boy ag'in' Pistol City! What kin he do?"

The two men separated, and while Captain Noll walked toward the main part of Pistol City, the Mexican doctor glided toward the mountain.

"Captain Noll may risk it, but I would not," he said to himself. "He will wish some day that he had sent Marmoset with Red Roy to the bottom of Satan's Hotel. *Sacrista!* why didn't the young one die before Captain Noll got back to camp? Doctor Pablo has been a fool!"

The stars going down the trails of the sky were indicating the approach of another morning, when this same Doctor Pablo reappeared at the door of the Marmoset's cabin, and lifting the wooden latch without noise slowly pushed it open.

The tin lamp was still burning on the little table near the middle of the apartment into which his snake-eyes peeped and he saw—what?

Asleep on the cot of skins and camp-blankets, the figure of the patient who had given him the slip.

It is needless to say that the eyes of Doctor Pablo almost leaped from his head at this discovery; he seemed to be nailed to the spot.

Marmoset seemed to be sleeping the sleep of the innocent, and though Pablo's eyes were keen, they were not keen enough to see the camp dust on the moccasins that stood in one corner of the room.

The Mexican doctor looked daggers at Marmoset who appeared to be unconscious of his prying presence, and muttering some maledictions in Spanish, he shut the door without the least noise, and turned away.

"Oh, you cunning viper!" cried Marmoset, whose eyes opened wide and twinkled with triumph when the door was shut. "You think you caught me napping, but you did not if I had my eyes shut. After to-night, you'll not call

this young badger your patient. Look out, Doctor Pablo. A cyclone will strike Pistol City before long, and you may be found among its victims."

Doctor Pablo went toward the monte place known as Holy Hank's, and strode across its threshold with a desire to impart some news in his eyes.

"Where's Captain Noll?" he inquired of a stalwart miner-rough, the first man he encountered in the den.

"Not hyer. You'll find him where they hid the camp nugget, I guess, doctor."

"Peste! I forgot," and Doctor Pablo turned on his heel, and marched toward the door.

"Hold! stop that yarb-mixer!" called out a loud voice, and a burly gambler rose from one of the card-tables and designated the Mexican doctor with his outstretched hand. "I've got a letter for him."

Doctor Pablo had already halted and he turned toward the speaker with eagerness and curiosity in his eyes.

"I accidentally ran ag'in' one ov yer friends in 'Frisco, doctor," the gold tough said, thrusting one hand beneath his jacket as Doctor Pablo came forward. "I don't know how she knowed I war from Pistol City, ner how she found out you war hyer; but I war intrusted with a letter which I hev hyer."

The hand drawn out from beneath the jacket was holding a piece of folded paper between his bronze thumb and fingers, while the Mexican's eyes sparkled like diamonds.

"Give it to me, Senor Dave!" he cried reaching for the letter.

"On one condition, doctor."

Doctor Pablo bit his lip.

"Well?"

"That you treat the crowd. It's worth suthin' ter carry a letter from 'Frisco ter Pistol City."

"The letter, then the drinks," said the Mexican, and having clutched the document he waved his hand toward the man behind the counter.

That was enough; nearly every game in the house was instantly stopped, and the whole crowd came toward the bar, eager to drink at the cunning doctor's expense.

Doctor Pablo eyed the letter with a curiosity impossible to describe; the superscription seemed to be in a hand that puzzled him, and those of the crowd who took pains to watch him, saw him seat himself at one of the empty tables and begin to open the package.

The doctor was absorbed in the business before him, and did not hear the men as they drank boisterously to his health.

All at once a wild exclamation rung from his lips, and he staggered from the table upsetting the chair and almost lost his balance.

"Great Cæsar! thet letter must hev been loaded!" cried Dark Dave who had brought it from 'Frisco. "Look! Doctor Pablo's mad!"

Not a vestige of natural color remained on the Mexican doctor's face; his eyes had the glare of the maniac's; he looked like one suddenly bereft of reason.

"Hyer, doctor! what's struck ye?" cried Dark Dave, springing toward the doctor who seemed about to sink to the floor. "Darn me! if I hed known ther thing war loaded, I wouldn't hev brought it ter camp!"

The miner-rough was at the Mexican's side, and his eyes were riveted on the letter which the excited man clutched the tighter in his hand.

"Back! it is not for Senor Dave an' his pards!" he shouted. "Caramba! I thought I would never more hear of her! What did she look like, senor?"

"Who?—the person what gave me that letter? I didn't git ter see much ov her, doctor, but I saw two black eyes and a shapely figger—thet war all."

"An' she told you ter carry this accursed letter to Doctor Pablo, eh?"

"Yes."

The Mexican was silent for a moment.

"Let the viper come!" he suddenly cried.

"Like a fool, she has warned me beforehand."

"Is she comin' hyer, doctor, ter afford Pistol City a picnic?" laughed a voice from the crowd.

"Picnic be hanged!" grated the yellow doctor, as his eyeballs seemed ready to leap from his head for very madness. "In the presence of all of you, senors, I say let the viper come!"

He turned on his heel and started toward the door, the letter still clutched in his hand.

Ere he reached it he was confronted by a person, at sight of whom he started back with an ejaculation of surprise.

"Captain Noll!"

The boss of Pistol City saw the color of the doctor's face, and laughed.

"What's whiten'd you?" he cried. "You look like a person who's run afoul ov a ghost."

The doctor's first reply was the thrusting of the letter from San Francisco into the desperado's hand.

"Read it, Captain Noll," he said. "Senor Dave fetched it from 'Frisco for Doctor Pablo."

"Only a letter, eh? An' it scared you white? Ho! ho! doctor! this'll never do."

"Read it, Oregon."

Oregon Noll smoothed the creases in the crum-

pled message and stepped nearer the main lamp in the place.

"Great Jehosaphat!" he suddenly exclaimed, throwing a glance toward the observant Mexican. "Is this person your enemy?"

"Yes."

"Why, she's my friend. Before I left 'Frisco I got a letter ov warnin' signed by these same figgers—4-11-21."

"Peste! impossible!" cried the doctor.

"By heavens! it is so. I gave it to Tunis for a cigar-lighter."

Doctor Pablo looked dumfounded.

He could not believe that the person who was his enemy was also Oregon Noll's friend.

He went forward and reached out his hand for the letter, hissing as he executed the movement:

"I say let her come! She will find Doctor Pablo ready for her in whatever shape she comes. The heel of the Mexican will crush the viper before she stings!"

Then he took the message from Oregon Noll's hand and read to himself its startling sentences which ran as follows:

"The scotched serpent still lives, southern tarantula! You should have killed her, but your madness overreached its mark. You stand in the shadow of death, for I have sworn by my dead to spare you not. The viper whose sting is death is on your trail. Prepare to die. 4-11-21."

"How did you wrong that person?" asked Captain Noll as Doctor Pablo got to the end of the message.

"Never mind, captain. Doctor Pablo has never struck without cause! Let the she viper ferret out the descendant of the dons. When she finds him, she will speedily die!"

The next moment the figure of Doctor Pablo vanished through the door of the monte den, leaving the crowd to stare after him in speechless excitement.

"Let the old fool go," said Oregon Noll to those who showed signs of following the Mexican. "I'm willin' for the woman an' him ter fight it out—if she comes hyer. He won't stand ter ther racket—"

"Silver Chick! Hurrah!"

Captain Noll turned toward the door just as the handsome rough whose figure had that moment appeared in it came forward.

Silver Chick it was sure enough—the man he had left in San Francisco to get away with the Dakota Tiger.

The next second a stride brought the two pards together—the gold-camp captain and his lieutenant, Silver Chick.

"Well," said Oregon Noll with eagerness.

"Did you find Noah Nelson?"

The eyes of Silver Chick answered before his lips spoke a single word.

"Who did I ever hunt thet I failed ter find, captain?" he exclaimed.

"No one, Chick. You found him, then?"

"Bet yer life I did, Noll. By Jove! he war a sleek one, but I caged him in the end."

"How?"

"I decoyed him back ter Monte Merle's an' he went through ther floor like a cannon ball. No wonder thet picture fascinated him!"

"Why, Chick?"

"Because he war the brother ov the galoot swingin' from the crag."

"No!"

"Fact, by Jupiter! We're safe now, captain. Thet Dakota Detective will hunt no more."

CHAPTER VII.

A BROKEN COUNCIL.

OREGON NOLL looked into Silver Chick's eyes for a minute, and then leaped forward.

"You deserve the straightest goods in Pistol City!" he exclaimed, as he seized his pard's arm and led him triumphantly toward the counter, while a part of the crowd set up a cheer.

"Hyer, Hank, set out thet bottle ye only push forward on state occasions. The Chick's come all ther way from 'Frisco, an' is dry."

"Dry as a chip," said Silver Chick, as he proceeded to fill with whisky the glass which had been placed before him.

Captain Noll stepped back a pace and watched his right bower down the liquor with much gusto, but no sooner had the Chick placed the glass back on the counter than he clutched his arm again.

"I want yer, Chick," he said, accompanying the words with a meanful look, and a moment later the two worthies were leaving the den.

"Did Tunis come back with you?" asked Noll, when they reached the open air.

"Yes; we had a hard ride ov it. I war anxious ter reach camp afore you dealt with Red Roy an' his pards."

"You're a little too late," smiled Noll. "The galoot had no pards, consequently thar war only one man ter deal with."

"Wal?"

"We sent him to ther bottom of Satan's Hotel, if the durned place has any such thing. We did it all with a piece ov taller candle. It war quite ingenious—the plan, I mean—but it worked like a charm. Ah! we're at my shanty."

Without ado of any kind, Oregon Noll opened

the door of the rough cabin which they had reached, and the two men entered.

A match in the captain's hand soon produced a light which was communicated to a lamp, and Oregon Noll seated himself on a table while he motioned Silver Chick to a rather high three-legged stool—the only article of the kind in the room.

There was something striking in the presence of these two men as revealed by the dirty lamp that burned from a wooden shelf fastened to the unplastered wall.

They had been pards for years, and through thick and thin.

Shoulder to shoulder they had encountered dangers all over the wild West and Southwest.

Oregon Noll, smooth-faced, did not look like the leader; that position seemed to belong to the black-mustached, keen-eyed and broad-shouldered gold land Apollo who had just got in from San Francisco.

The dust of the mountain-trails was still on his boots, at the heels of which appeared a pair of silver spurs.

"If you had struck Holy Hank's five minutes sooner, you'd hev seen a frightened Greaser!" said Captain Noll, as he looked down into Silver Chick's face.

"Who—the doctor?"

"No one else. Dark Dave brought him a letter from 'Frisco. It whiten'd his face the moment he set eyes on it. The doctor's got a female for an enemy, an' what is strangest ov all, Chick, she's ther same person who sent me the letter which I gave Tunis for a cigar-lighter."

Silver Chick started visibly.

"Tunis lost that letter somewhar on the streets ov 'Frisco; but never mind," he said. "He recited from memory most ov its contents."

"With the signature in figures?" inquired Noll.

"Yes; 4-11-21."

"That's right. Wal, that same person sent the doctor's letter by Dave. She hates him, an' warned him ter be on the lookout for her hyer in Pistol City before long. Jehu! but our Mexican doctor war scared. When I came on ther scene, he looked as if he'd seen a hull generation ov ghosts. But he plucked up at last an' dared her ter come. Do you know anything about thet woman?"

The question was direct, and was squarely put.

"I didn't get ter hear from her while in 'Frisco," was Silver Chick's somewhat evasive answer. "I wasn't among the favored ones, captain. Mebbe I left the city too soon. What do you know? Turn about's fair play."

"I'm in the dark," was the prompt reply.

"I didn't get any information out ov the doctor, for he left too soon. I don't take much stock in a woman's threat, but that one, whoever she is, wants to befriend me, else she would not have warned me that the Dakota Tiger was on my track in 'Frisco. By Jupiter! Chick, ef it wasn't for affairs hyer, I'd go back ter the city an' get at the bottom ov this little adventure. We'll dismiss her now. Tell me all about the Dakotan's failure."

Oregon Noll clasped his big hands over one knee and settled himself back on the table to hear a complete report of Silver Chick's operations in San Francisco.

"Now drive ahead, an' don't omit anything," was his command, ere he relapsed into complete silence.

Silver Chick began the narrative, and told it movement for movement as the reader already knows it. How he and Tunis followed Noah Nelson, and how they finally decoyed him into Monte Merle's, where the trap was sprung and the Dakota Detective disappeared from human view.

Oregon Noll listened without interrupting the narrator once till he reached this point.

To his surprise Silver Chick paused as if he had reached the end of his story.

"You don't stop there, do you?" he exclaimed.

"Why not?" asked Silver Chick with a smile.

"Haven't I got to the Tiger's doom? I left him in Merle's care. Isn't that enough?"

"It ought ter satisfy any reasonable man."

"I should say so. You know, as well as I do, that he will never escape from that dungeon under the monte den. You know who Monte Merle is, an' from what you've seen ov him in the past, you know that we kin trust him still. I say that the detective's trail ended the moment the trap was sprung. When I saw him stand before that picture gazin' at the body hangin' from the crag like a man charmed by a snake, I knew who he war. Years hev passed away, captain, since thet hangin' spree in the Colorado canyon, but I hev'n't forgotten a single sarcumstance connected with it. One ov the last things the victim said war about a brother he had somewhar. Do you recollect thet?"

"Distinctly," said Oregon Noll. "I told 'im then thet we'd be prepared for a thousand brothers ef he had 'em."

"Wal, that man who war lookin' for us in 'Frisco war a brother. Noah Nelson he called himself on the register ov the Coast City Hotel,

but that warn't his name. Among the papers we took from the pockets of the youngster just afore he war pulled up ter the crag with the secret he refused ter divulge, war a letter signed 'Yer brother, Conrad.' The man who went through the floor at Merle's war that Conrad, an' he war a cool 'un."

"But he's settled now," said Oregon Noll assuringly.

"Forever! It war lucky thet you got onto him in 'Frisco. The letter helped you, you say?"

"Yes. An' when the writer comes here ter pay up an old score with Doctor Pablo, we'll see at least that she has fair play."

"Fair play?" cried Silver Chick springing up. "By ther eternal heavens! she shall hev more than thet. What is that Mexican rattler that we should protect him ag'in' a woman who has a right ter hit him hard? Let her come! For the good turn she did us in 'Frisco, captain, I'll hold the yaller doctor up an' let her go at him."

Outside the cabin door at that moment sounded something like a serpent's hiss.

Oregon Noll leaped from the table and was at the portal in the twinkling of an eye.

A smile passed over Silver Chick's face while he waited for his pard's return.

"The Mexican overheard me an' couldn't hold his tongue; that war all," he said, in half-audible tones, and the following moment Oregon Noll reappeared at the door.

"I saw nobody, but I heard a step," he said in answer to the inquisitive glance from Silver Chick's eyes.

"It was the yellow doctor," was the response. "I'm glad he heard what I said, for I never did like a hair on his head. I mean what he heard me say," and Silver Chick brought his clinched hand down on the table by way of emphasis. "When that woman comes ter this mountain camp she shall have more than fair play. I don't know—I don't keer who she is. Silver Chick stands between her an' the boasted child ov the Don's!"

Oregon Noll's right bower had scarcely finished ere a light rap on the door startled both occupants of the sport's home, and the captain was at the portal again.

This time he opened it to start back with an exclamation of surprise and a hasty glance thrown at the Chick.

"Come in," he said, still holding the door open. "Thar's nobody with me but Silver Chick, an' he's as true as steel."

Before the minute vanished there stepped across the threshold and into the lamplight a youth of perhaps sixteen summers, ruddy of countenance, with a well-rounded form, and deep eyes of the darkest blue.

"Karl, the Kid!" exclaimed Silver Chick.

"No," said Oregon Noll, taking the youth's hand. "Since Red Roy, fool-like, proclaimed his discovery to ther hull camp, this is Pure-Gold Floss, ther prettiest creature west ov ther Missouri."

A flush suffused the visitor's face, rendering it more striking than ever.

When the blue eyes were raised they encountered Silver Chick's keen look and saw him come forward.

"You hit it hard thet time, captain," he said, with a swift glance at Oregon Noll. "So this creature is ter be Pure-Gold Floss from now on, an' not Karl, the Kid! Wal, I'm glad ov thet. She always did look awkward ter me in boy's clothes. By Jove! I've seen many a mountain daisy in my time, but ther one thet blossoms in Pistol City discounts 'em all."

He stood before the transformed youth with his big black eyes full of admiration.

"Why did you come?" said Oregon Noll, breaking the silence, while he looked at the visitor.

"I had to go somewhere," was the answer. "I had a dream that forced sleep from my eyes."

"A real ugly one, Floss?" laughed Silver Chick.

"Yes; it frightened me," said the girl, for girl the speaker was despite the boy's clothing she wore. "I found myself out in the starlight before I could realize what had happened, and the first thing I saw was a light through the chinks of this cabin. It was like two dreams in one. In one of them I saw a man fall suddenly through the floor in a fine room filled with pictures—"

"Jehosaphat!" interrupted Silver Chick.

Oregon Noll did not start. "Wal, what war the next scene?" he said with assumed calmness.

"I saw a horse tearing along the mountain road just beyond San Francisco. His rider was a splendid looking man, with a long black mustache and a waxed goatee."

"Monte Merle!" cried Silver Chick, and the next instant his fingers encircled the girl's arm. "Tell me," he went on, "tell me which way was he headed?"

"Toward Pistol City," was the reply.

Silver Chick dropped the arm and started back.

The eyes of the two pards met for a moment while they were gazed at by the wondering girl.

"What does it mean?" suddenly cried Oregon Noll. "What errand would take Monte Merle

from his palace? I b'lieve in dreams, I do. As sure as thar's a sky above us, Floss saw him on the road ter Pistol City. What brings him hither?"

Silver Chick's one stride carried him to where the captain stood.

"Something has happened!" he said in low tones. "Merle comes with a warnin'. I fear—I'll bet my teeth thet the Dakota bloodhound has escaped!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW MONTE MERLE CAME.

DAYLIGHT broke again over Pistol City among the gold hills of California, and before the shadows of night, had fairly fled, two men well mounted on fine black horses rode from the gold camp over the trail which, if followed persistently in all its meanderings, would land them in 'Frisco.

"I hold fast ter thet dream ov ther gal's," said one of the riders, giving his companion a quick glance. "She saw the Dakotan fall through Merle's floor as plainly ez if she had been thar herself, an' she saw him ridin' for Pistol City ez fast ez horseflesh kin carry him."

"He'll be along soon, then, ef nothin' has stopped him," was the answer. "I kin hardly think thet he got out ov Merle's trap, but ef he hez, why, we'll be ready for him ef he intends ter operate in this neck o' the woods."

"Ready? Bet yer eyes, Chick! Ef he didn't escape, what brings Monte Merle this way?"

"We'll wait an' see," said Silver Chick, quietly for he was one of the two and Oregon Noll was the other.

They rode on until the gold camp was a mile behind them, and on a certain spot drew rein side by side and began to wait for the man Pure-Gold Floss had seen in a dream.

They had halted at a place from which they had a fair view of the trail for a mile ahead, so that no one could come upon them suddenly.

The morning light brightened and the sun came up over the eastern horizon, scattering the mountain dews and beautifying the rough-cut landscape.

No horse and rider rose in sight to greet the eyes of the two pards, and at last their ardor and expectations began to cool.

"Hang the dream, anyhow!" suddenly exclaimed Silver Chick, in disgustful tones. "I didn't take much stock in it at first, an' ter tell the truth, captain, I came out hyer pretty much ter gratify you. It war a scare arter all. Monte Merle is in his old quarters, while we're watchin' for 'im hyer, and the man-tracker from Dakota lies dead amid eternal darkness!"

Oregon Noll's countenance brightened with hope at this assurance and he said:

"By Jehu! I'll hope ye'r right, Chick; but somehow or other thet dream went through me like an Injun arrear. Come! we'll go back ter camp, but we'll not tell ther boys what fools we've been."

"Nary tell, captain," laughed Silver Chick, and so the two desperado sports turned their steeds' heads toward camp and gave up the watch for Monte Merle.

About the time that they reached the camp, Doctor Pablo knocked with his bronze fingers on a certain cabin door and was invited in by a voice on the inside.

"Holy Dios!" cried the Mexican, as his glittering eyes caught sight of the youth who sat on a three-legged stool drawn up to a table and was in the act of proceeding to discuss a scanty breakfast.

The reply was a laugh which made sport of the Mexican's consternation.

"I'm a dandy patient, ain't I, doctor?" laughed Marmoset, as he continued. "Last night I was down on my back; this morning I am about to assault breakfast. I owe it all to your last medicine. It sent life and strength dancing through my body. Thank you, Doctor Pablo, thank you. Won't you step up and refresh yourself?"

The boy talked rapidly, and did not give the schemer of the camp a chance to put a word in anywhere along the line, but when he finished, the doctor shook his head.

"I knew my medicine was good, but I did not expect such magical results," he said.

"Disappointed, eh? Disagreeably so, I hope. What's happened in camp since last sunset?"

Marmoset's penetrating eyes happened to be fastened on Doctor Pablo as he put the abrupt question.

He saw the Mexican start.

"Several things, my little senor," and the doctor came forward and halted beside the boy, who looked up into his face. "In the first place, Captain Noll is back."

"I know that."

"And Silver Chick has come also."

This time the youth started.

"Ah? the Chick back, too?" he exclaimed.

"This is news to me, doctor. When did he get in?"

"A little while before daylight. He and Tunis came together. Captain Noll had left them in 'Frisco, but, *peste!* they almost beat him home."

It was evident that Silver Chick's arrival was distasteful to the doctor.

Perhaps he recalled certain words which he had lately overheard—Silver Chick's threat to stand up for the woman who was coming to take vengeance on the cunning piece of humanity called Doctor Pablo.

"And so this is your budget of news?" smiled the boy. "Nothing happened last night save the arrival of Captain Noll and Silver Chick?"

"Oh, yes. *Sacrista!* have I lost my senses?" cried the physician of Pistol City. "They banished Red Roy from camp."

Marmoset pretended to be greatly surprised.

"What!" he cried. "Banished Red Roy?"

"Yes."

"What had he done?"

"Crossed Captain Noll," said the doctor, showing his teeth in a grin. "I always knew, Senor Marmoset, that Red Roy's time would come."

The boy was silent and thoughtful for a moment, during which time he was narrowly watched by the Mexican.

"Which way did they start, Red Roy?" he asked, looking up.

"Toward China," laughed Doctor Pablo.

"What do you mean?"

The hand of the man of medicine fell suddenly on Marmoset's shoulder.

"Don't you know, senor? I must give you something to enliven your perceptive faculties. They sent Red Roy, the secret-hunter, to the cellar of Satan's Hotel."

Marmoset sprung back with an ejaculation of horror on his lips.

"Then it is good-by, Red Roy!" he said. "Doctor, you drive a cold chill to my heart."

The black eyes of the "descendant of the Dons" snapped with intense satisfaction.

"Red Roy will cross Captain Noll no more," he said. "*Caramba!* the captain is a dangerous man."

"And Silver Chick is his right bower, doctor."

Did Marmoset speak thus just to try the temper of the man who stood over him?

If he did, he saw it tested, for a gleam, a lightning bolt of rage lit up the doctor's eye and his face suddenly darkened.

"Ho! you don't love Chick, I see," laughed Marmoset.

"No! I hate the ground the camp adder crawls over!" flashed the doctor. "Senor Marmoset, he must not do what he said he would last night."

"What was that?"

But the doctor hesitated.

To tell the youth what Silver Chick had said might bring forth an admission that he (the doctor) had played eavesdropper, and that would never do.

"Never mind, boy," he said. "If he attempts to carry out his threat, Pistol City will lose Silver Chick as effectually as it has just lost Red Roy. But I'm keeping you from your breakfast. Don't eat too much at the start. I will come again before night. After breakfast you will take a dose—a swallow, senor—of this. It will keep in your limbs the new strength that has come to them, and by the end of the week the deer can't outrun you."

As he hurried toward the end of his last sentence Doctor Pablo from an inner pocket drew a small vial filled with a thick dark liquid and placed it beside Marmoset's tin plate.

"Thanks, doctor," said the youth. "If you keep on at the rate you've been going at a few days longer, you'll have me challenging the best wrestlers of Pistol City."

Two minutes later Marmoset was the sole occupant of the cabin, and he held the vial up between him and the window.

"Follow your directions, viper? not much!" he exclaimed. "There's death in that bottle and I know it. You've hated me in secret for more than two years, but I've been too much for you thus far. I drew you out just to cover a few late tracks of my own. I fancy that I know pretty well what happened last night without having to come to you for an account. My worst wish for you, Doctor Pablo, is that Silver Chick may soon try his grip on your throat," and concealing the vial beneath his jacket, Marmoset began to discuss the simple meal he had taken from the cabin's larder.

The youth was permitted to finish in silence, and when he concluded his breakfast he walked to the four-pane little window and gazed out upon the camp.

"A new visitor to Pistol City!" he suddenly exclaimed, starting back with the exclamation still on his lips. "Who on earth can he be? He looks like one of Doctor Pablo's friends, and—"

The youth paused abruptly for the person who had attracted his attention, and who had entered camp on horseback, had drawn rein within a stone's throw of his cabin.

The morning was far advanced, and the sun shone boldly in the stranger's face, which was swarthy like a Mexican's, and on his wide, slashed trowsers and elegant jacket, *a la vaquero*.

"I used to see those fellows along the Southwest border, before I became a citizen of this gold camp," said Marmoset to himself. "Hello! here he comes—straight toward my shanty."

Marmoset did not withdraw, but stationed himself at the window, and kept his eyes riveted on the camp's visitor.

He looked like a man still under thirty; his eyes were very black, his hair long, and his figure splendid and without a fault.

He caught sight of the youth all at once, and beckoned to him with his hand.

Marmoset, without hesitating, went to the door.

"Hyer, kid!" he exclaimed. "Is this Pistol City?"

"That's what we call this camp," said Marmoset.

"I thought so, but I warn't sartain. Never been in this part of the diggin's before in all my life, and I guess I've used spur an' lasso over nearly ther hull ov Californy. Pistol City, eh? I've been hyer ten minutes, an' still breathe in my boots."

Marmoset could not but smile at the ludicrous expression that was visible on the new-comer's face while he gave utterance to the last sentence.

"It's not such a deadly place to a man who attends strictly to his own business," he said.

"Which means, boy, thet you owe yer present health ter strict attention, eh?"

"Perhaps I do."

"Then, I could live hyer an' grow fat," laughed the stranger. "Whar's yer p'isen dispensary?"

"By riding down the street a few yards you'll see Holy Hank's sign, and—"

"Holy Hank's, eh?" interrupted the new-comer. "Must be a relative ov Celestial Charley, who used to mix straights when Sawdust City war in its prime. Thanks, my boy. Vaquero Van is under obligations to you for yer kindness," and wheeling his horse suddenly and giving him the point of the spurs, he rode in the direction indicated by Marmoset.

The youth gazed after him with much curiosity, and saw him leap to the ground in front of Holy Hank's.

After awhile a camp roustabout came from the place and taking the horse by the bridle led him toward the corral and horse-sheds.

"Vaquero Van must have concluded to stay awhile," said Marmoset drawing back from the window. "It remains to be seen how he will get along in Pistol City."

His idea of the case seemed to be the correct one, for the sun crept up to the zenith, and went down toward the west, and he had seen no signs of Vaquero Van's departure.

Once or twice during the day he caught sight of some of the well-known citizens of Pistol City, but nobody came to his cabin to give him a chance to discover how the man with the fancy garments had been received.

Night came again, swooping down upon the gold camp like an eagle from the mountains, and Marmoset could no longer rely on his little window for a point of observation.

"I'm goin' out to see for myself," he said to himself at last. "I am Doctor Pablo's patient no longer. That Mexican viper whom I hate—"

He was stopped by the opening of his door, and the next moment he looked into the face of Pure-Gold Floss.

"Red Roy was right!" he exclaimed. "You are not Karl the Kid any longer. What shall I call you now?"

"Pure-Gold Floss," was the answer. "But don't let us talk about that. I have some news. Did you ever hear of Monte Merle?"

"Yes," said Marmoset eagerly.

"Well, whoever he is, he has just come to Pistol City. They've carried him into Holy Hank's."

"Carried him?" echoed the boy.

"Yes; a knife was sticking in his back!"

"And he got here dead?"

"He isn't dead yet," said the girl. "It's a terrible thing isn't it? Who is this Monte Merle?"

"The proprietor of the biggest monte den in 'Frisco. There is a strange connection between him and Captain Noll. What should fetch Monte to Pistol City at this time? that's what I'd like to know. He wasn't far behind the man who calls himself Vaquero Van. Let us go and see what is happening at Holy Hank's."

Marmoset took the girl's hand as he finished, and led her to the door before she could reply.

As they stepped out into the starlight they heard a pistol-shot, and then these ringing words:

"I am on the war-path ag'in! Woe to the man who gave Monte Merle his present ov steel!"

The two young people halted.

"Silver Chick is a tiger when he smells blood!" whispered Pure-Gold Floss.

CHAPTER IX.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

FROM where they stood, Floss and Marmoset saw the stalwart figure of the man who had just spoken the terrifying words.

It was Silver Chick, and as he came toward the young couple they shrunk toward the boy's cabin and held their breath while he passed on.

They then went forward again and halted at the open door of Holy Hank's place, from

whence they could see what was transpiring on the inside.

It was true, as Pure-Gold Floss had informed Marmoset, that Monte Merle had come to Pistol City with a knife sticking in his back.

On a few blankets hastily collected and thrown on the floor of the saloon, lay the proprietor of the gilded gambling-den of San Francisco.

His sudden appearance and in the condition he then was, had struck terror to miner-pards of the famous gold camp.

When he was lifted from his horse he was thought to be already dead, but an examination showed that life still remained in his frame, and he was carried tenderly into the place and laid on the blankets.

Doctor Pablo for once turned up just when he was wanted, and dressed the wound of the weak and unconscious man.

All was excitement in the saloon.

The blow had been dealt apparently from behind and with murderous intent; the knife had entered the body behind the shoulder, and had been evidently aimed at the heart.

If a bone had not resisted the keen blade, Monte Merle would never have needed Doctor Pablo's services.

A draught of strong brandy forced between the gambler's lips revived him somewhat, but he suddenly fainted again, and a cry of "He's dead!" went through the crowd.

Then it was that Silver Chick bounded from the saloon, firing his revolver to give emphasis to his rage, and uttering the mad threat against the person who had used the knife against Monte Merle.

"What do you think of him, doctor?" asked Oregon Noll, who stood over the man on the blankets.

"Live, mebbe," was the answer. "A little lower, Senor Noll, and Monte Merle's heart would have bled."

"Thank Heaven for the miss," ejaculated Captain Noll. "We can't lose Monte; he is one of us."

A singular gleam seemed to light up the eyes of a certain person who stood near the boss of Pistol City as he finished the last sentence.

This was the new visitor to the gold camp, the man who called himself Vaquero Van.

His arms had helped to bear Monte Merle into the den, and he had watched him with much curiosity ever since.

Vaquero Van had passed nearly his whole time since his arrival at Holy Hank's, and this is why nobody had seen him moving about the camp.

Silver Chick and Oregon Noll had taken kindly to the fellow, for among other things to commend him he had plenty of money which, if the owner was inclined to "fight the tiger," was the "open sesame" to Pistol City society.

The new-comer seemed exactly what he called himself—a wealthy vaquero who had cut loose from his herds in the Southwest and was making a tour of California for amusement, and perhaps, profit, if fortune in cards did not desert him.

By the time Monte Merle arrived to lend an exciting episode to camp life, the vaquero had become somewhat of a favorite at Holy Hank's, and he was among the first to denounce the person who had assaulted Monte Merle.

"When we get Merle ter talkin' we'll know suthin' about this infernal stab," said Oregon Noll to the vaquero. "Doctor Pablo will bring him ter that stage before long. Silver Chick went off like he often does—half-cocked. He thought Monte Merle, his brother, war dead, an' thet war enough ter r'ile any man."

"His brother?" ejaculated Vaquero Van, somewhat surprised as he showed by his looks.

"Yes, Monte Merle an' Silver Chick an' brothers, though not many people in Californy know it," was the answer. "Thet's why, twixt you an' me, pard, ther Chick always won at Merle's tables. Say, thar, doctor; can't ye git Monte ter talkin'?"

"Pretty soon, captain," said the Mexican, and within the next five minutes Monte Merle found his tongue.

Oregon Noll stooped eagerly over the gambler with an important question bubbling to his lips.

Monte Merle threw a glance around upon the impatient crowd which Captain Noll understood.

"He wants ter make a revelation ov some kind, boys, an' he'd raythur not hev us all hyer," he said looking up at the miner-roughs. "It'd be polite for ye ter withdraw a minute till he's hed his say. If it concerns the camp ye shall know it; I promise yer thet. Ther' shall be no camp secrets hyer any more ef I kin help it."

The crowd began to move toward the door, and the two young people outside glided away.

"I wish you'd stay, captain," said Oregon Noll to the vaquero who was moving away with the crowd, and the man with a pleased look remained behind.

When the door had been shut Oregon Noll and Vaquero Van stooped over the handsome man on the blankets.

The gambler sport was white, but his black eyes shone like diamonds, and his hand clutched Oregon Noll's arm as he said in audible tones:

"He got away after all."

"Who got away?" asked the boss of the gold camp.

"The man who fell through my floor—the human tiger from the Northwest."

"Hades! that's bad!" ejaculated Noll. "Floss saw him go down in a dream, but she didn't see him git away."

"Floss?" asked Monte Merle in a strange manner. "Who's Floss?"

"You'll know by an' by," was the response. "So he got away?"

"Yes; curse him!"

"How did it happen?"

"I hardly know. Silver Chick told you how the trap was sprung?"

"Yes."

"I thought that was enough, for no man ever got away before," said Monte Merle coolly. "I went up-stairs to watch the tables for a few minutes. When I went to look after our prisoner I found the pit empty."

"Jehu!" cried Noll. "Thar must be a traitor in your house."

"In my establishment? Never! The devil must be that bloodhound's right bower. He got away by magic. I didn't stop to consider how. I knew that Tunis an' Silver Chick had started for camp, an' as I knew also that the man who fell through my floor was brother to the youngster hanged years ago in the Colorado Canyon, I came hyer ter warn you all that he was at large."

"An' he met you on the trail somewhar an' gave yer a knife under yer shoulder?"

"No. It wasn't that man-hunter," said Monte Merle with much emphasis.

"Who, then?" asked the desperado sport eagerly.

"That's what I don't know for certain. I war ridin' along slowly, givin' my horse a breathin'-spell, when something darted out at me from the mountain wall, an' I heard a mad cry like a woman's voice an' felt the steel hit home. It war all over in a second, an' I guess the person thought the first blow settled me. It warn't repeated, an' as every star faded out ov sight immediately my horse started off like an arrow shot from an Injun bow."

Oregon Noll could hardly wait for Monte Merle to conclude.

"Do you think a woman did it?" he exclaimed. "My God! what kind ov an enemy hev you made in 'Frisco?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "I don't think I war struck for anything I may hev done thar. As the knife came down I heard a voice hiss: 'Take this for the Colorado hangin', Monte Merle—that war all!'"

Oregon Noll almost sprung erect at this revelation.

"Great heavens! a woman on our track, too?" he cried. "Did you ever hev a tigress at yer heels, Vaquero Van?"

He looked into the vaquero's eyes as he put the question.

"Only once, an' then it war a red tigress—an Injun woman," answered Van, with a smile. "I got rid ov her easily, an' since then I've not been bothered by women. But Monte Merle, your friend, doesn't say thet his assailant war a woman; he only thinks so."

"I am ready ter swear ter it," said the man on the blankets. "The voice belonged to a woman, an' the flashin' eyes also."

"Thar's another puzzle fer us ter pick at," Oregon Noll replied. "Ef thet Dakota Detective finds Pistol City, he'll be down hyer, for, twixt you an' I, Vaquero, he has good cause ter hate about seven ov us pards. Isn't thet straight goods, Monte?"

Oregon Noll's appeal was not without its effect.

"You kin just bet he has!" exclaimed the 'Frisco sport. "Ef Satan hedn't aided him, I wouldn't be hyer, cut, mebbe, ter ther death!"

"It's not thet bad. Doctor Pablo assures me thet he'll fetch yer through all right."

"He shall have twenty thousand ef he does!"

"We allow no robbery hyer," announced Captain Noll. "He shall bring you through an' charge ther bill ter Pistol City. But thet woman?—she puzzles me!"

A smile appeared at the corners of Monte Merle's mouth.

"Time will find her out," he said. "You must look out for the Dakotan. He will not give up the trail he struck in 'Frisco."

"Let him come!" hissed Oregon Noll, a tiger in his eyes. "We found him out as Noah Nelson thar, an' we'll penetrate all his disguises hyer. He can't hoodwink the pards ov Pistol City. Avengin' his brother, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"Very well; let him come hyer an' show his hand! Thar war eight ov us when thet youngster war pulled up ter ther Colorado crag, an' since then only one ov us hez passed in his chips—Hemlock Hal, who tried ter git ther best ov two grizzlies at once. Does this man expect ter wipe out the score single-handed? I say, Monte, does he pit himself ag'in' you, an' me, an' Silver Chick?"

Monte Merle's eyes dilated at the last name.

"Whar is Silver Chick?"

"Gone ter find ther person what gave ye

ther blade. He saw yer faint an' went off like powder, takin' ye for dead. He'll turn up soon, an' then we'll all prepare for this vengeance-hunter from the North. Vaquero Van, you'll stay hyer and see the picnic, won't yer?"

"I've nothing ter take me away just yet," said the vaquero, a strange glitter in his eyes. "After all, this man you speak ov may not come."

"Gods! but he will," said Monte Merle. "He's not one of ther kind thet turns back. I saw thet in his eyes ther moment I got a look at him. If he is the brother of the man hung ter ther crag, look out for him."

"We will, an' bring his hunt ter a sudden ending!" cried Oregon Noll. "Ther boys are gittin' impatient out thar."

"Let 'em come in an' drink ter my recovery," smiled the monte sharp.

Captain Noll stepped to the door and admitted the miner-toughs who swarmed into the den again, eager to learn what Monte Merle had imparted during their absence.

"I'll see yer to-morrow ef not sooner," said Vaquero Van, touching Oregon Noll's arm. "An' you, Monte, we'll meet again."

He left the saloon alone, followed by the eyes of nearly every one present, and soon disappeared.

"Who is he, Oregon?" asked Monte Merle.

"A rollin' stone huntin' moss among ther gold camps," was the reply. "Didn't he ever buck ther tiger at yer tables?"

"I don't remember him, but his eyes look kinder familiar."

His eyes, Monte Merle?

Yes.

"Well, I'm in the tiger's lair sooner than I hoped," muttered the vaquero when he found himself some distance from Holy Hank's. "They don't know me; the seven doomed villains don't suspect that the avenger of innocent blood is in their very midst. I'll wait till Silver Chick comes back, and then, by heavens! I'll strike a blow this wild region will never forget! The woman who struck you, Monte Merle, fortunately did not kill. What debt has she to wipe out? I'd like to know, an' if she comes to Pistol City, I'll find out."

We need not say that the eyes of the vaquero flashed like balls of fire while the words just recorded dropped from his tongue.

"They still boast of their infamous deed in the Colorado canyon. Wait till I lift my hand to pay them back!"

He was now near the famous place known as Satan's Hotel, and the moon showed him the yawning gulf down which, but a few hours before, Red Roy had been lowered at the end of a rope.

"Halt! I've got you!" suddenly hissed a voice behind the vaquero. "You can't play a double game when I'm around. Your eyes gave you away ter me ther moment I saw yer! You may fool Captain Noll an' ther boys, but you can't fool Tunis!"

Vaquero Van had turned, and stood face to face with a man who covered him with a revolver.

"You ar' the Dakota Detective—the man who fell through Monte Merle's trap the other night. I know you!" continued Tunis, in tones of triumph. "Hyar you masquerade as Vaquero Van, but in other quarters you've gained the title ov Cool Conrad. Hands up! I march you back to the lions!"

A moment of intense silence followed, and then—the unmasked man leaped straight at Tunis, and the hand that clutched the revolver was caught at the wrist and firmly held.

It was a second's work, and it took Tunis by surprise.

"Yes; you are right!" was hissed at his ear. "I am Conrad from Dakota, an' I've spotted the men I want. It has been a long hunt, but I'm getting thar at last. So your eyes ferreted me out, eh? So you war going ter march me back ter ther lions of Pistol City? Tunis, my deluded galoot, I shall have ter tell you thet you're mistaken. I intend ter clear my way as I go, for I have sworn that nothing shall stand between me and the avenging of my brother's blood! They sent Red Roy to ther bottom of Satan's Hotel last night, and you, Tunis, are going ter join him."

"For God's sake, no!" pleaded the spy. "I'll not peach on you. I—"

"Trust you, Tunis?" laughed the detective.

"I guess not!"

He almost lifted Tunis from the ground, as he stepped toward the brink of the pit; then he pushed him headlong forward!

"I'll see who plays this game through!" Cool Conrad said.

CHAPTER X.

THE COOL HUNTER.

THE man who was playing this desperate double game in the gold camp stood for several moments longer near the brink of Satan's Hotel, and then turned and quietly walked away.

He was as cool as if nothing of importance had happened, as if his clever disguise had not been spoken and his true name breathed aloud in the air.

Tunis would carry no more messages to his chief at San Francisco; he would never unmask another vengeance-hunter.

If sought for he would be found at the bottom of Satan's Hotel.

In the mean time, Monte Merle, the gambler sport, had been carried in a blanket by the miner roughs to Oregon Noll's cabin, where he was laid on the captain's couch with a sleeping potion administered by Doctor Pablo.

Captain Noll stood over the gambler for a few minutes, or until he had dropped into a heavy sleep, when he left the shanty and went back to Holy Hank's, where the toughs were discussing the events which had just taken place.

Selecting four dark-faced and resolute-looking fellows from the crowd, he beckoned to them to follow him, and he led them to a shaded place under the brow of the nearest mountain.

"Boys," said Oregon Noll, placing himself before the quartette with his arms folded on his breast. "I kin say freely to you what I wouldn't say to ther pards left at Hank's. In ther first place, I ask ye ef yer recollect the youngster we strung up ter a crag once in a Colorado canyon because he wouldn't betray ter us ther location ov a gold vein which we hed reason ter suspect he had diskivered?"

"We hev'n't forgot ther kid, captain," answered one of the men promptly and certain nods told that he spoke for all. "Thet galoot hed a brother—a fellow called Conrad, an' he's now playin' tiger on our track."

"Whar is he?" cried the listeners. "Ef he wants a picnic, let him come ter Pistol City! Playin' tiger, eh? Put us onter him, Captain Noll."

"He war in 'Frisco a short time ago, an' he struck our trail thar," continued the leader of the canyon hangmen. "Silver Chick succeeded in cagin' him, an' left thar, b'lievin' thet he war out o' our way forever, but hyer comes Monte Merle with ther news thet he's loose somewhar."

"Is he ther daisy what cut Monte Merle?"

"No."

"Who did, then?"

"We'll find out soon enough, but we're hyer ter prepare ter receive thet infernal Dakota Detective who, havin' struck our trail in 'Frisco, will follow us hyer. We must stand together in this fight for life, for thet's what it is, pards."

"With six ag'in' one?" was asked with a sneer.

"Yes," said Oregon Noll. "A fight for life it is with six ag'in' one. None but ther coolest man on earth would go inter such odds. We must watch for him, an' when he comes we must deal with him as certainly as we dealt with Red Roy."

"Give us a chance at the pard from Dakota!" exclaimed the men. "Ef we don't prove too much for him, by Jupiter! we'll leave camp an' herd horns on ther Texas frontiers!"

Captain Noll's eyes gleamed proudly on the men who stood ready to second his most desperate suggestions.

He knew them all; he had seen them tried under circumstances that were enough to test the mettle of the bravest, and not once had they quailed.

He had but to tell them that a vengeance-hunter was on their track to make their eyes flash, and to send their bronze hands mechanically to the weapons that were ready in their belts.

The majority of gold camps possess men like the pards of Pistol City, but few of the bands have been trained under leadership like Oregon Noll and Silver Chick.

Monte Merle was a member of the same band which, some years prior to the date of our story, had hanged a youthful gold-hunter in a Colorado canyon because he would not divulge a supposed secret; but Merle had drifted apart from his companions, to become the rich monte king of San Francisco.

Still, his companions had not lost sight of him, neither had he lost friendship for them.

It is true that he and Silver Chick were brothers in flesh, as well as in dark atrocities, but there were few persons outside of the brotherhood who knew this.

Monte Merle's ride from 'Frisco to warn Captain Noll of Cool Conrad's escape was proof enough that he considered himself one of the old band of desperado-sports who had at one time terrorized the gold-fields of the Colorado.

The gambler-sport was to his old pards true as steel.

Captain Noll listened with a smile of satisfaction to the mad exclamations of the four men he had led from the camp.

"Thar'll be five ov us waitin' for him when Silver Chick comes back," he said.

"Whar is ther Chick?"

"He's gone ter look arter the person who cut Monte. Daylight'll see him back, an' then we'll hold a final council. I want thet man-hunter ter come. He won't ketch one ov us nappin'. Gods! I wish he war hyer now."

Crouched behind an unusually large bowlder, not twenty feet away, was a man who had not lost a single word dropped by Captain Noll and his pards.

This person was Vaquero Van, and his eyes twinkled madly while he listened.

He saw the five march back to camp, with his hand at the butt of a revolver.

"Not yet!" he said to himself, as his dark eyes followed them. "I shall wait till she comes. Silver Chick will not find the person who gave Monte Merle the benefit ov a bowie. I will wait for her before I strike."

Gradually his splendid figure rose above the rock, and he watched the five pards until they disappeared among the shadows of the shanties.

"There's something I'd like to know," he went on, before he moved away. "You don't stay up all night, Captain Noll, and besides, you'll go back and watch by Monte Merle. I'll seek you there!"

"Maybe you'd better not."

The voice was low but plain and Cool Conrad turned half-way round to confront a veritable night serpent, Doctor Pablo.

The instant he saw the Mexican he stepped toward him and reached his side before he could recoil an inch.

"So you're prowlin' round camp like a spy, eh?" he said, darting the doctor a fierce look. "Wherever I've found your race I've found sneaks and spies. By Jehu! I've a mind ter wring yer neck! Do you know me? Speak!"

The heavy hand of the detective fell like a trip-hammer upon the doctor's shoulder, and threatened to drive him into the ground.

"You are Vaquero Van. I know that because I heard you say so," was the answer.

Did Cool Conrad trust the truth of that reply?

He gave the Mexican a look that seemed to pierce him through and through and to say—"Lie to me, and I'll kill you!"

"Very well. You b'lieve I am Vaquero Van because you heard me say so eh?" he said, still looking at the doctor. "Just a minute ago you said thet perhaps I'd better not go to Captain Noll to-night. What did you mean?"

"Oho!" laughed the Mexican. "I mean because the captain is not in the best of humor. He imitates the tiger when the fur's been smoothed the wrong way. Peste! I would not go to him to-night."

"You are not Vaquero Van," smiled Cool Conrad.

"I know that, senor."

"Consequently, you do not care to interview the tiger. Very well. I shall."

"Do as you please. You'll find him with Monte Merle by this time."

The man-hunter's hand fell from the doctor's shoulder, but he did not step back.

"Did you come in from 'Frisco to-day?" asked Doctor Pablo.

"Mebbe so."

"You didn't see anything of a woman who wants my blood, eh, captain?"

Cool Conrad could not suppress a smile.

"Wants your blood, Doctor Pablo?" he cried.

"Who in the world wants it?"

Doctor Pablo ground his teeth.

"The viper that sent me this hiss," was the answer, and there appeared a piece of paper in the doctor's hand. "I'll strike a match for you, Senor Van, an' hold it for you while you read it."

"It's no love-letter is it, doctor?"

"Caramba! no!" hissed the Mexican.

A moment later he had struck a match, and was holding it up for Cool Conrad to read his note of warning by.

Doctor Pablo watched the detective closely, but his eyes were not keen enough to detect a slight start on Cool Conrad's part.

"Hello!" said the Dakotan to himself. "What does this mean? The person who sent me the note of warnin' at the hotel in 'Frisco tells Doctor Pablo hyer in Pistol City to prepare for death. His enemy an' my friend? I don't understand this. An' Monte Merle says his assailant was a woman!"

He read the warning through without missing a word.

"Thar's no love in that letter, doctor," he said, with a smile, as he handed the letter back to the Mexican.

"Hate to the core, senor!" and Doctor Pablo's hands clinched. "Let the viper come! Doctor Pablo is ready to grind her head in the dust!"

The match went out, and the Mexican thrust the letter back into the pocket from which he had taken it.

"So," he said, abruptly, "you ar' still of a mind to visit Oregon Noll?"

"Yes," said Cool Conrad.

"Let me give you a piece of advice. Don't mention where Tunis is."

Despite his coolness, the Dakota Detective started back.

"Do you know?" he said, looking down into the doctor's face.

"Si, senor."

"And you are ready to betray me?"

"Not for the world. You hate Silver Chick?"

"As I hate a liar."

"Then Doctor Pablo will never give you away." And the Mexican held out his hand. "That camp dog has said that he will hold me up while the she viper strikes. You hate Silver Chick. Doctor Pablo will not betray you, senor; the revolvers of Pistol City could not make him tell who sent Tunis down Satan's Hotel after Red Roy. Trust the doctor, senor."

"I'll do it," said Cool Conrad; but he did not take the extended hand. "I make no threats, Doctor Pablo. You hold your future in your hands. Good-by." And while the scheming Mexican stared, Cool Conrad vanished.

"He knows who sent Tunis to his doom, but he knows naught of my identity," murmured the detective. "Let the Mexican whelp beware!"

That was all.

A short time afterward Cool Conrad, as Vaquero Van, appeared at the door of Oregon Noll's cabin and bestowed a light rap upon it.

"Welcome, Vaquero," exclaimed Captain Noll, as he admitted his visitor into the apartment, whose lamp showed Monte Merle asleep on the blanket-cot on the floor. "You're clever ter keep me company. Monte ther, sleeps like a log, thanks ter Doctor Pablo's potion. Ef Tunis'd drop in, we'd send him ter Hank's arter a couple ov straits."

Tunis!

Cool Conrad did not start, though he knew that Tunis would never serve his master any more.

He would have answered in some manner if the quick gallop of a horse had not struck their ears at that moment.

"Mebbe that's Silver Chick comin' back," said Oregon Noll with a glance at Conrad. "I hope it is. We want him hyer jest now."

The two men waited in silence for a moment while the noise of hoofs grew more distinct.

"It is the Chick!" cried Captain Noll. "Thar! we'll see him in a second."

The unseen horse had come to a halt in front of the cabin, and the men inside heard some one alight on the ground.

In another moment the door was flung open, and the well-known face of Oregon Noll's right-bower appeared in view.

"Back ag'in!" cried the boss of Pistol City.

"Yes, an' with news, too! We've been hoodwinked ag'in, Noll. I didn't find the person who gave Monte Merle the knife, but I discovered— Great Jehu!"

He had not seen Cool Conrad till that moment.

Their eyes met, Silver Chick's full of accusation, Cool Conrad's blazing with defiance.

Silver Chick stepped clear inside, shut the door and braced his broad back against it.

"Captain," he said, "thet man's playin' a double game." And his outstretched hand designated Cool Conrad. "He's never been Vaquero Van before ter-night."

"That's a fact, Silver Chick," said the detective. "I am Cool Conrad of Dakota, the avenger of the boy you hung!"

The two sports started back, but the detective's revolvers already covered them.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE CHICK GOT HIS CLEW.

"HELLO thar! In ther name ov creation, who ar' you?"

The man who uttered these words leaned forward from a saddle and with a cocked revolver in his right hand, looked into the face of the man who stood on the mountain trail where the mellow moonlight fell.

It was several hours before the scene that closes the foregoing chapter, and fifteen miles west of the gold camp.

"Who am I?" was the answer. "Why can't yer see?—a human bein', like yerself!"

"I kin see thet plain enough, but that doesn't satisfy me. Confess ter me at once thet you ar' ther Dakota Tiger what got out ov Monte Merle's cage in 'Frisco, or I'll paint ther trail with the contents ov yer brain-box!"

The man addressed was well built and dark-faced, but passably good-looking, and he had on ordinary clothes that did not seem to fit him any too well.

"I am Jeff Banning," he said in response to the threat just made. "I'm no tiger, an' I've never been caged either."

"I don't know about that," was the reply by the man in the saddle. "I'm Silver Chick, ov Pistol City, a reg'lar hyena on two paws, when I'm riled, an' I give ye fair warnin', Mr. Bannin', thet I'm not in ther best o' humor ter-night. See hyer! them clothes don't fit yer anatomy. Thet coat's a little tight at ther shoulder. You've traded with some one."

The man in the trail seemed to start under the keen eyes of Silver Chick.

"I'd like ter know who a fellar could trade suits with in this part ov ther moral vineyard," he said, assuming a bold front which was rather overdone.

"With a certain chap expected in this region—with a man who writes his name 'Noah Nelson' on hotel registers, but who is in reality a different kind o' hair-pin. Look me squar'ly in ther eye, Mr. Jeff Bannin'. I'm not goin' ter stand any monkeyin' at this quarter ov ther game. You might stand thar in them clothes an' hoodwink a tenderfoot, but I'm an old bird. Out with the truth! Yer clothes don't fit yer, an' besides I know a vaquero when I see one. You may be American born by yer name, but thar's mixed blood in yer. Who robbed yer?"

"Nobody," said the man in the trail.

"Then it war a free trade, eh?"

There was no reply, but Mr. Jeff Banning threw a quick glance over his shoulder.

Quick as a flash Silver Chick caught the furtive look, and his revolver crept several inches nearer the man so unexpectedly discovered.

"Thar's no gittin' away from me till I'm through with yer!" the gold desperado said. "Now, Mr. Bannin', you will open yer truth trunk an' display its contents. Who wore yer clothes afore they got on yer back?"

There was fire in Silver Chick's eyes, and he spoke in tones that told the man that he meant stern business.

"All right!" exclaimed Oregon Noll's lieutenant after a moment's silence. "If you ar' goin' ter be stubborn, I'll proceed ter lay yer out."

The threatened man saw the keen eyes drop to a level with the revolver into which he had been forced to look.

"Hold!" he cried throwing up one hand. "I'm not goin' ter be killed for any man. I'll give you ther truth, Silver Chick."

A faint smile crossed the desperado's features.

"Thet's both sensible an' timely," he said. "Now, go on. I'll be judge ov yer statements, an' ef I think you lie, I'll touch this trigger. Proceed!"

"I am Captain Banning whar I hold forth in the Southwest. I am cattle-owner an' hacienda proprietor. I war on my way ter 'Frisco from a tour ov the back mines, when I came suddenly upon an old she grizzly thet frightened my hoss inter a runaway, an' left me afoot in ther mountains. I war cussin' my luck about sundown, when I heard a hoss comin', an' thought it war my own huntin' me up, an' ashamed ov himself for runnin' off. By Jupiter! I felt glad about thet time, for I hed tramped it afoot till my feet war sore. I wanted thet hoss ther worst kind, I tell yer, Silver Chick. Wal, thet ani-male came along, an' all at once ran afoul ov me; but thunder! it warn't Lightning Wing, my hoss."

"Ov course not," said Silver Chick, as the man paused.

"The hoss thet came up afore I could git out ov the road hed a rider, an' he hed me kivered afore my fingers could get at my shooters. Thet man wore ther clothes I've got on now, an' I hed on a reg'lar vaquero suit, such as I hev a right to wear."

Silver Chick seemed on the eve of giving vent to an exclamation, but he suppressed it and waited for the vaquero to proceed.

"Ther moment he sot eyes on me I saw thet suthin' war about ter happen," Jeff Banning went on, after a short pause. "He made a proposition ter trade clothes, but I didn't want ter. Then he leaned forward an' jammed his revolver inter my face while he said, 'Trade er die!' It war a ticklish situation fer Jeff Banning, I tell yer, pard. He had me at his mercy, an' I saw 'shoot' in his black eyes as plainly as I ever saw death in a rattler's."

"Ter cut a long story short," said Silver Chick impatiently, "you traded?"

"By Jove! I had ter!" was the reply, as the vaquero attempted a smile. "I had ter doff my duds in front ov his pistol, and he shed his'n quicker nor lightnin', and tossed 'em at my feet. Then what d'yer think he did next?"

"Took yer shooters?"

"No. He made me take an oath thet I'd never give ther trade away, and thet I'd tramp on ter 'Frisco, ov course in a happy mood."

"An' you swore?" asked Silver Chick eagerly.

"Jehu! I had ter! But what does a forced oath amount ter? In my opinion, it doesn't bind worth a curse."

"Ov course it doesn't," said the gold sport. "I know whar I kin lay my hands on this galoot who masquerades in yer clothes, Jefferson. Won't I show him the flash ov ther best revolver in Californy when I strike Pistol City ag'in?"

"Is he thar?" asked the vaquero.

"I should remark! He struck camp this forenoon an' introduced himself as Vaquero Van, from ther cattle region. Hang me! ef he didn't hoodwink me completely. He looks no more like Noah Nelson in yer clothes than a Digger looks like a pigtail. He's thar now, but wait till I git back! Hades! but I'll create a sensation. Shall we plant 'im in yer clothes, Vaquero Jeff?"

"I don't keer what you do with 'im," was the reply. "I'm disgusted enough ter tramp it all ther way ter 'Frisco, but you kin bet yer life thet I'll never mention this durned trade ter any one."

"You wouldn't like ter go to camp, eh?"

The vaquero seemed to recoil an inch at the suggestion.

"Thet's out o' my way," he said, but it was evident that the presence there of the man he had betrayed shaped his answer.

What! go to Pistol City and face the man who was playing a desperate game in his clothes?

Jeff Banning might be a courageous man in the country of the vaqueros, but he had not nerve enough for this scene.

His declination was no surprise to Silver Chick.

It made his eyes twinkle, however, with a contemptuous light for the vaquero's courage.

"Thar war nothin' ov value on yer clothes?" asked the gold sport.

"Nothin'."

"An' you found nothin' on his thet rewards you for ther swap?"

"Nary loot," smiled the vaquero. "He threw my purse back with his suit. That man, whoever he is, is not a robber."

"That's a fact, I guess. He's huntin' suthin' more precious than money—blood!"

"Yers, Silver Chick?" asked the vaquero, with deep-seated curiosity.

"The blood ov seven ov ther best men thet ever swore pardship," was the quick reply. "I'm included in ther number; but he hasn't got thar yet."

Silver Chick straightened in the saddle as he finished and the revolver which a few minutes before had threatened the vaquero's life was returned to its accustomed place in the desperado's belt.

"The seven pards ov Pistol City owe you the'r eternal thanks for yer story," he continued. "Arter a few days from date, you'll find us all in 'Frisco. We'll meet at Monte Merle's. You know whar thet is?"

"Wal, I ought ter. I've chased the tiger all over ther house," said Banning.

"We've all done that!" laughed Silver Chick.

"I'm off fer ther camp now. I started out ter find ther villain thet cut Monte Merle, but I've run across a bonanza ov another kind. Won't I spoil Vaquero Van's little game when I strike camp? To my thinkin', the Dakota Tiger had better stayed at home!"

He gathered up the reins and waved the man before him a parting salute, as he laughed in anticipation of the bloody work he expected to do when he got to Pistol City.

"Thar goes a thunderbolt ov flesh an' blood!" ejaculated Jeff Banning, gazing after the man who was riding away. "If he shouldn't make sure work of the g'loot in my clothes, I'll hev ter look out for him in the hereafter. I had ter 'peach on 'im, for what kin a man do but spit out the truth when a revolver almost touches his brain-pan, an' when a devil in bronze holds a finger at ther trigger? Jewhilkier crickets! why didn't I stay at home an' play chuck with my cowboys? It's now a tramp ter 'Frisco, an' nothin' else, for I don't expect ter hev my hoss turn up any more. I hope Silver Chick, as he calls himself, will make no mistake when he meets the Satan in my clothes."

The hoofs of Silver Chick's horse had already ceased to sound on the ears of the unfortunate vaquero, and, after a short rest, he wearily resumed his tramp toward the city far away over leagues of wild trail, and through a country that bristled with perils.

"No! I won't tramp it ter 'Frisco," he suddenly exclaimed, as he came to a halt a mile beyond the spot where he had encountered Silver Chick. "That fellow with the big mustache an' black eyes owes me a hoss for my information, an' I'm goin' ter make Pistol City yield me one. By the eternal skies! I'm goin' ter ride ter 'Frisco!"

He turned his face in the direction taken by Silver Chick, but had not advanced twenty paces when he was suddenly confronted by a person who had stepped noiselessly into the center of the moonlit trail.

"Thunder an' lassoos!" cried Jeff Banning, starting back, while one hand moved mechanically toward his revolver. "I've just dismissed one unpleasant interviewer, an' now I run afoul ov another."

"No interviewer this time," was the response. "You are not going to Pistol City. Keep your original resolution and go on to San Francisco."

The vaquero saw that his confronter was backed by a horse and that the face and figure belonged to a woman.

"You are not wanted in Pistol City," continued the confronter.

"An' I've no special business in 'Frisco."

"Perhaps not; but you'll be safe there."

"Thet may be a fact, but by Jupiter! I'd like ter see the man who made me trade suits ter-night—I'd like ter see him dead, I mean."

"If he's the man I think he is, he will take care of himself," was the reply. "Go to 'Frisco, Mr. Jeff Banning."

"Are you goin' that way?"

"No; I go to Pistol City."

The vaquero looked into the face of the speaker a full minute before he spoke again.

He saw before him a fair face with a pair of resolute eyes, a fine figure clothed in garments that reached midway between ankles and knees, leggins and a pair of shoes, one of which wore a spur.

The glossy locks of the woman had been cut short, and her head was surmounted with a wide-brimmed felt hat, which lent her a romantic but somewhat brigandish appearance.

She might have been past twenty, but in the moonlight she looked very young to the mixed-blood vaquero.

"Mebbe," he said, at a venture—"mebbe you're on a blood-hunt, too?"

The eyes of the girl instantly flashed.

"Ah! I am!" she exclaimed. "All the enemies I possess are in Pistol City. I sent one of them over this very trail with a knife under his

shoulder, and I shall pay the whole gang for their deed of deeds in their lair. I have no enemy in this wide world who is not in the camp under the mountain back yonder. They—some of them at least—have wondered who warned them of the Dakota Tiger's hunt. My letters have puzzled more than one man. Ha! ha! I first told Cool Conrad that Oregon Noll, his bitter foe, was in Frisco, and then I turned right around and warned Oregon Noll. Wasn't that a strange proceeding, Jeff Banning?"

"It war, for a fact," said the vaquero.

"I did it because the man wanted by Cool Conrad struck me as hard as they struck him," the woman went on. "I have bided my time; I have waited for vengeance as the tigress waits for the hunter who has shot her whelps. It is strange that just when I should be ready to strike, Cool Conrad comes upon the scene. They caged him at Monte Merle's, and I thought he was out of my way, but I now know that in your clothes, and as Vaquero Van, he has invaded the lions' den—that he has tracked the California beasts to their mountain lair. There's where I ought to be at this moment. I have another enemy there, and my blood runs hot as lava at thought of him!"

"Heavens!" cried the vaquero. "Do you hate everybody?"

"No," was the answer. "Language cannot tell how I hate the viper called Doctor Pablo—the Mexican curse who has infested earth too long! Fortune has hid him from my sight a long time, but I've baffled her at last, and the serpent has been found!"

"In the name of creation, who are you?" exclaimed Jeff the vaquero.

"Me? Only a woman who has a right to kill eight men. Two grizzlies robbed me of one of my enemies, but I will attend to the rest."

"But your name? What do they call you at home?"

"Home!" was the exclamation. "I've almost lost the meaning of that word. My home is the path that leads to the desperado-sports of Pistol City! Once—years ago, when I was a happy girl—I was Leo Lanier—now vengeance has made me Leo the Sleuth-hound. My mission is to find the comrades of the noose, my duty to strike them down; after that, Vaquero Jeff, I disappear from the eyes of the world."

"I wouldn't have you on my trail for Californy!" said the man.

"Perhaps not," smiled the girl. "I don't want a drop of your blood, but by all that is just! I will not spare one of the pards of the gold camp. Now, you will take my advice and go on to Frisco. You betrayed Cool Conrad to Silver Chick, who escaped me to-night, but I do not fault you for it. His revolver was at your head."

With the last word the huntress glided back to her horse, and climbed agilely to the saddle before the vaquero's eyes.

"I might overtake Silver Chick, but I will not try it," she said to Jeff, the cattle prince. "In Cool Conrad, he will find a foeman worthy of his steel. The man from Dakota has never been baffled yet, but this time Leo will cheat him of his prey."

"He will turn on you, girl! If he does, look out."

"I don't fear him. Under his skin Cool Conrad is as gentle as a child," was the reply. "I could melt him to tears with three words. He may turn on me, but he will never strike."

The horse was headed toward Pistol City, and the next instant Jeff, the vaquero, for the third time since sunset found himself alone on the mountain trail.

Leo the Sleuth-hound rode rapidly away, and not long afterward entered the camp of the miner-roughs.

"On the battle-ground at last," she ejaculated. "I would like to settle with Doctor Pablo first of all. Where is the yellow viper?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN FROM SATAN'S HOTEL.

"MERCIFUL heavens! what saved you from the depths of Satan's Hotel?"

"What do yer think, girl? I crawled out."

The young girl who heard these words from the lips of the man who had pounced upon her like a panther among the cabins at Pistol City, clutching her arm like the grip of a vise, tried to break away, but in vain.

"No, no!" she cried. "You didn't do that! No man can fall to the bottom of that black hole and live. You can't be Red Roy, though you look like him, and have his voice. You must be his double."

The man laughed.

"I'm ther only genuine an' original Red Roy, since my visit ter Satan's Hotel more'n half tiger. Yes, girl, I came safe from ther depths ov that gold-camp hostelry."

"But you wasn't to the bottom. I will not believe that!" exclaimed Pure-Gold Floss, for she it was.

"Wal, that makes no difference. I'm ther real Red Roy, ther identical galoot lowered inter ther Hotel by Oregon Noll an' his pards because I diskivered that you warn't Karl, the Kid, but a girl in boy's clothes. Ther boss devil ov this camp sot a candle under ther rope thet held me

swinging in darkness, an' thet candle burned ther rope through, too."

He laughed again.

We have said that he had pounced like a tiger upon the girl whose sex he had proclaimed in an unguarded moment throughout the gold camp. This was true.

It was night—the same night that witnessed the events recorded in the preceding chapter, and Cool Conrad's confrontation by Silver Chick in Captain Noll's shanty.

Who had saved Red Roy, for he stood before Floss in the flesh, big as ever, but in mien twice as ferocious as it was his wont to appear.

Pure-Gold Floss, Captain Noll's *protegee*, did not take any stock in Red Roy's hint that nobody had aided him in his escape from Satan's Hotel.

She knew enough of that inky pit to know that a fall to the bottom would crush the life out of any human being.

She knew that Roy had been lowered into it with a rope under his arms, and with his hands tied upon his back, and that Oregon Noll had left him to his fate with a lighted candle under the rope that held him in mid-air, and that, an hour later, a blackened piece of rope told the story of the candle's work.

Floss was stealing back to her cabin from an interview with Marmoset when Red Roy encountered her.

He was the last man of all living whom she expected to see, and it was no wonder that she took him for his own double.

"Don't look at me as ef I war a livin', movin', lie," he went on after a pause. "They thought ter finish me forever when they hung me like a smokin' ham inter Satan's Hotel! Wait till I walk up ter Hank's counter an' order my old time decoction. Great Caesar! won't thar be a tumble among ther gold lambs of Pistol City?"

"You'll not do that?" cried Floss. "My God! you'll not walk to a fate as dreadful as the one to which you've already been assigned?"

"Why not? What's Red Roy got ter live for but ter git even with ther buzzards ov Californy?" he exclaimed. "Thar's only one hand in this hull camp what would lift itself for me an' thet's a boy's."

"Marmoset's?" inquired the girl.

"Marmoset's," was the reply. "Me an' thet kid swore friendship afore I went ter Satan's Hotel, but I don't run his head inter danger by askin' him ter help me git even with this devil's nest; not much, girl."

"You will find enemies at Holy Hank's at any time. This camp is under the captain's thumb."

"I know thet an' a shame it is, too. Who made you play boy all this time?"

Floss hesitated.

"Come; don't be afraid ter speak, girl—Floss they call you now, don't they? I'd like ter know why you've been actin' boy so long?"

"It was at Oregon Noll's bidding," was the low reply.

"The captain, eh? Ar' ye his girl, Floss?"

"I am not. My parents were killed by the Comanches when I was in the cradle."

"Thet is the captain's story, eh?"

"And Doctor Pablo's," said the girl.

Red Roy's countenance darkened at mention of the Mexican doctor's name.

"So thet yaller rattler has a finger in the pie, has he?" he hissed. "They both say thet yer parents war wiped out by ther Comanches when you war a babe? If thet's so why did they keep ye hyer as a boy?"

"I don't know," answered Floss.

"Then, I'll find out!" said Red Roy in determined tones whose intensity sent a thrill to the girl's heart. "I tell ye thar's suthin' bad at ther bottom ov this affair. I could force it out ov Oregon Noll ef I hed him by the throat. I could scare it out ov Doctor Pablo with my pistol under his snaky eyes. It warn't so much because I diskivered thet ye war a girl, Floss, as thet I threatened the secret them two gold buzzards hev been keepin' so long!"

To herself Pure-Gold Floss was forced to acknowledge the force of Red Roy's remarks.

"Whar's Marmoset?" suddenly asked the big rough.

"I left him in his cabin a few moments ago."

"I'll not disturb him but he'll laugh when he hears ov the ghost's visit ter Holy Hank's."

"You are going there, then?"

"Why not?" laughed Red Roy.

"Because the dare-devils there are not easily frightened," was the reply. "They are armed to the teeth, and you know this whole camp is under Captain Noll's rule."

"Oh, certainly, but I'm going ter wake 'em up jest ther same. Wouldn't ye like ter see ther racket, Floss?"

"No," shuddered the girl-mystery of Pistol City. "Remember that you go to Holy Hank's against my advice."

"Yes, my little one. I'd go thar ther way I feel now ef I had ter fight my way through grizzlies to ther door. Good-night! I'm no ghost, an' arter all it's not sartin death ter be lowered inter Satan's Hotel."

Red Roy, the stalwart, stepped back as he finished the last sentence with a light chuckle of satisfaction, and a moment later an eager bound carried him far from the still astonished girl.

"I'll go home and await the result," she said aloud to herself. "If he meets Oregon Noll at Holy Hank's some person will die."

As for Red Roy, he walked straight toward the favorite resort to which we have already introduced the reader.

He paused for a moment as the gallop of a horse penetrating the cool and pleasant night air fell upon his ear, but he took but little note of it.

"Somebody comin' inter camp—Silver Chick, mebbe," was all he said, and on he went again toward Holy Hank's.

The door of the place was open as usual and Red Roy, looking into the den before he reached the threshold, saw the scene he had seen there a thousand times before.

Evidently the miner-roughs of Pistol City were not thinking of him at that moment; the gambling-tables were all filled, and the games that prevailed there were at their height.

"Now, watch me change ther scene," said Red Roy as if addressing somebody at his side. "I'll see what kind ov a ghost I make among my old pards."

Three more strides brought him to the door of the den, and a moment afterward he leaned noiselessly against the jamb, as yet unperceived by the gamblers inside.

"I'll take a lightnin' straight, Hank!" suddenly rung out his voice. "Toss in a little brimstone, an' mix in the devil's gloss!"

The effect was electrical and astonishing.

While he yet spoke, every eye became riveted upon him, and the bronzed gamblers started from their seats.

If a veritable ghost had come back from the abode of the disembodied, the pets of the gold camp would not have been more amazed.

"It's mighty damp in Satan's cellar!" continued Red Roy. "When a fellar falls a mile through darkness an' lights on solid stone it's apt ter shake him up."

"Holy terror! it's ther ghost ov Red Roy!" yelled Holy Hank dropping the bottle which he had just taken from the shelf.

Everybody were on their feet, and there was a general shrinking toward the rear end of the den.

Holy Hank's place was a frame structure with upright weather boarding, and the only place of exit was the front door in which stood the guest of Satan's Hotel.

"D'ye ever drink with a ghost, gents?" continued Red Roy striding toward the frightened crowd. "Hyar, Hank! pour out yer pizen an' drink with yer pards ter Hades!"

"Thunder an' graveyards! no!" shrieked the terrified dispenser of the ardent, and he dashed from behind the counter and broke for the end of the room.

"Kick the boards loose!" he shouted. "It's death ter drink with a spook!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Red Roy. "I've an order from ther proprietor ov Satan's Hotel fer ther hull kit ov yer!"

That was enough.

As if goaded by a single impulse, the whole crowd made a break toward the rear of the gambling-den.

It was the charge of a mob which no power, not even that of stanch weather-boarding, and wrought nails, could check.

In less than a minute afterward, crash! crash! went the tall planks, and they had scarcely touched the ground ere the crowd rushed pell-mell over them into the night.

Men who would march with a smile into a den of grizzlies, or walk single-handed into an Indian camp, fled like boys from what they called the ghost of Reddy Roy.

"I'll proceed ter help myself free ov expense," said the victor of the affair, as he walked behind the deserted bar and sampled the contents of a certain bottle which he had seen on many previous occasions.

"Look yonder!" cried one of a crowd of men who saw through the breach in the weather-boarding the man from Satan's Hotel refreshing himself after the orthodox manner. "No ghost drinks whisky thet way. Boys, we've been fooled. It's Red Roy himself. Whar's the captain?"

"Watchin' Monte Merle. Go for him—quick!"

A dozen men started off.

"Guard the front door an' don't let Reddy out till Captain Noll comes. Hold, thar! only one ov ye go arter him. A dozen'd disturb Monte Merle. To the front door, thar! Don't let the galoot out!"

The eyes of Red Roy lit up with a mad light as the last words of the loud speaker struck his ears.

With a revolver in each hand, he moved steadily toward the door in front of which had already congregated a dozen of the miner-roughs of Pistol City.

"Hold on thar, Reddy!" exclaimed a voice as he reached the door. "You're no ghost. Stay whar ye ar' till ther captain comes, an' then—"

The sentence was broken by the sudden lifting of Red Roy's hands, and as he caught sight of the speaker, one of the deadly revolvers spoke.

"I'll summon Captain Noll myself!" he said dangerously, as the man hit between the eyes

with the bullet struck the ground with a thud. "Hands down, every mother's son ov ye! I'm ther shootin' ghost ov Red Roy, an' I hold eleven deaths in my hands!"

He came out of the gambling-den and walked away with his eyes fixed on the hard crowd which had already recoiled from the dead man lying at their feet.

Not a hand went up though more than one clutched the six-chambered arbitrator of border quarrels.

There was something striking in the march of Red Roy past the men who a few hours before had lowered him into the dark depths of Satan's Hotel.

"I've seldom played a better hand than this!" he sent back into the faces of the silent but maddened men. "Foller me, an' find yer eternal doom!"

He moved toward that part of the camp occupied by Captain Noll's cabin, and found it in a few moments.

Kicking open the door slightly ajar, he looked inside to see one man dressed in a vaquero costume covering Silver Chick and Oregon Noll with two huge navy revolvers.

"Jehosaphat!" cried Red Roy. "Hyer's another picnic!"

CHAPTER XIII.

SPARED FOR A TIME.

THE man with the two revolvers shot Red Roy a quick look.

"God above!" exclaimed Oregon Noll. "Hang me! if Satan's Hotel hasn't given up its guest!"

"I should say it has," grinned the gold-camp ruffian. "Just stand whar ye ar', an' ye, too, Silver Chick. I've been to ther bottom ov ther Hotel, but I'm not thar now, eh, my beautiful pard? It war ther boss adventure ov ther season. I'm no ghost, but meat an' bone. Red Roy ov Pistol City, big as life, an' on his muscle!"

The speaker had reached the cabin in time to interrupt proceedings of the most startling nature.

We have told in a former chapter how Cool Conrad went to Captain Noll's cabin to find that worthy watching over Monte Merle, and how Silver Chick put in an appearance and declared that he was not Vaquero Van, but that he really was the Dakota Tiger—the man who had escaped from Monte Merle's man-trap in 'Frisco.

Cool Conrad had proved himself too quick for the Chick and Captain Noll, for before the stratling accusation could be followed up in a proper manner, they found themselves looking into the muzzles of the detective's revolvers.

It was at this juncture of affairs that Red Roy, having frightened and escaped from the pards at Holy Hank's, interrupted the proceedings at Captain Noll's cabin.

Cool Conrad did not lower his revolvers, but he saw that Red Roy's appearance had unnerved Oregon Noll and puzzled Silver Chick.

Monte Merle on the blanket still slept, thanks to Doctor Pablo's potion, and Red Roy leaned against the door-frame with a grim smile of victory on his bronze face.

"I'd rather ye'd spare ther captain," he said, to Cool Conrad. "As for Silver Chick, ye kin scatter his brains over the wall. But ther captain an' I hev a little account ter settle."

The reply that was heard began back of the two revolvers.

"I'll brook no interference," said Cool Conrad. "Silver Chick there says I am not Vaquero Van. I don't forget that he's just returned from the trail."

"Whar I found ther man you traded suits with," snapped Silver Chick.

"An' he told you?"

"Yes, but only at the muzzle of my dropper."

"That's how I ceased ter be Vaquero Van to you, eh?" smiled Cool Conrad. "The man-trap in 'Frisco didn't hold me, Chick! Monte Merle came to warn you that I had escaped, an' he got a knife under the shoulder for his trouble! I have proclaimed myself. I am Conrad, from Dakota—the brother of the boy eight masked devils hung some years ago!"

Neither Captain Noll nor his lieutenant started at this announcement.

It was but a repetition of what they already knew, only they now had it from the lips of the avenger himself.

"You an' the woman hev joined hunts," said Captain Noll.

"What woman?" asked the detective.

"The viper that stung Monte Merle."

"No! I am leagued with no one," was the flashing answer. "I hunt for myself. I will permit nobody to join me. The oath I took over the body of my brother imposes all the vengeance on me."

"Then—"

Oregon Noll stopped suddenly for Red Roy had straightened in the door, and the men in the lamplight of the shanty heard the sharp click of his revolver.

"Gentlemen," said Red Roy over his shoulder, "you've got ter fight it out in a jiffy ef at all, for all Pistol City ar' advancin' on ther fort!"

A quick glance passed between the two desperado sports still covered by the man-hunter's weapons.

"Half thar! I see every man ov yer gang!"

continued Red Roy who with his back almost against the logs of the miner's shanty, faced a number of men plainly visible in the moonlight hardly thirty feet away. "I'm hyer ter say thet I'll open my batteries on ye ef you advance ag'in' my command."

The men of Pistol City had already halted. "Don't you see?" said Captain Noll's eyes to Cool Conrad; "our deaths will be followed by your own. After all, it is you, not Silver Chick an' I, who is caught."

"Back into your corner—quick! and without a word!" commanded the man from Dakota in the sternest of tones. "By the living Jehu! a refusal to obey my commands will be followed by death. Into the corner, dogs of California!"

Captain Noll and his right bower obeyed with the sullenness of whipped wolves, while Red Roy held the fretful crowd at bay in the open air.

"I suppose we're ter be shot down like dogs!" growled Silver Chick.

"You ought to be," was the answer. "I recollect that the boy who begged for mercy in the Colorado canyon got none. You are the last men in the world who should object to Conrad's vengeance."

"We only ask fair play. By heavens! Cool Conrad, as they call you, we don't fear you; but a man's a man, an' not a dog to be shot down without a show for his life."

"All right!" ejaculated the Dakota traitor. "I don't shoot a whiner," and his eyes, flashing madly, changed light long enough to give Silver Chick a contemptuous glance. "Shiver in yer corner thar, an' wait till I come again. You know who I am. The accusation of Silver Chick forced me to declare myself sooner than I intended to. Monte Merle is not dead, you say. Very well. Heal him for me, for when I turn my face northward not one of the accursed eight who hanged my brother will be alive! I have not hunted you men in vain. I did not come to your mountain lair for nothing. My only desire in this wild land is revenge, and by an' by no man can say that I did not satisfy it. Lift a hand while I face you, and I'll open your heads with a leaden sphere!"

He went to the door in two strides, but with his piercing eyes still riveted with savage fierceness.

"Holding them at bay yet, Red Roy?" he said to the big gold-digger who still faced the crowd outside.

"Bet yer boots, captain!" was the answer. "Awhile ago they fled like sheep from me as a spook, but they know thet I'm flesh an' blood an' thet when I shoot I kill."

Cool Conrad walked out and passed Red Roy with his revolvers still clutched in his hands.

"You and the men of Pistol City for it," he whispered as he brushed the gold-digger. "You can hold them level, can't you?"

"If I can't they can't be held thar!" was the reply.

"Look out for the two wolves behind you."

"I'll do that. Back thar!" and Red Roy started toward the crowd with outstretched weapons. "About face, an' march! or I'll open with my persuaders."

Before his resolute tramp and blazing eyes, the miner-roughs drew back, and all at once he threw down his hands and leaped to one side.

A wild yell rent the air as the whole crowd rushed pell-mell after him, but Red Roy darting between two cabins was soon lost sight of.

"Not that man, but the other one!" cried Oregon Noll as furious and almost out of breath he threw himself before the maddened gang who hunted with many a camp oath for Red Roy. "Red Roy's harmless compared to the one thet got away—the man who came hyer and called himself Vaquero Van! Let Red Roy go for the present. We want the other devil—Cool Conrad from Dakota!"

The crowd had halted before Captain Noll and Silver Chick who in a few hasty words explained the true situation of affairs.

"Why didn't you an' the Chick settle with 'im in ther cabin?" asked one of the boldest of the listeners.

"Because he got ther drop first," was the answer.

"An' didn't use it, ef he hates you so?"

"He didn't; thet's proved by our presence hyer. Ther day will come when he'll rue his mercy. He says he will come back."

"Ter Pistol City?" cried a dozen men, in incredulous voices. "But he won't!"

"But he will if we let him!" said Captain Noll. "In 'Frisco he war Noah Nelson, from San Diego; hyer he war Vaquero Van. He'll try his game in another disguise. You know the remedy, pards ov Pistol City?"

"This camp must be kept free from strangers!"

"Thet's it! Pistol City for the gold pards thet made it what it is," said Captain Noll, with cool emphasis. "The first stranger who enters it, dies! Come, Chick; I want you."

Captain Noll and his lieutenant walked off together, leaving the exasperated crowd to go back to the comrade Red Roy had left on the ground with a bullet in his brain, or to discuss the events of the night along Holy Hank's counter.

"Who helped Red Roy out ov Satan's Hotel?"

suddenly asked Oregon Noll, looking into Silver Chick's face.

"I don't know."

"Don't tell me thet he dropped cl'ar to ther bottom, for I won't believe it. He hed help. Thar's an ally in this camp. Kin you name him?"

Silver Chick was silent for a moment.

"It's another puzzle for me," he said, when he spoke again.

"We caught him comin' out ov Marmoset's cabin."

"Yes; wal?"

"What does thet signify ter you?"

"But the boy war sick. He war under Doctor Pablo's care."

"Sartainly; but ther doctor warn't always with his patient. I say thet Red Roy got out ov Satan's Hotel by Marmoset's help."

"Then I suppose you'll accuse him."

"Yes; an' if he attempts ter lie, I'll kill the camp boy Jonah!" grated Oregon Noll.

Silver Chick made no reply, but let the flash of rage soften in his companion's eyes.

"You'll wait till to-morrow, won't you, captain?" he asked.

"Yes. Now thet Marmoset knows thet my ward is a girl, he'll try ter make himself solid thar. Let 'im try it, Chick. I hev'n't watched Floss all this time ter be cut out by a boy. We kept ther secret pretty well till Red Roy unearthed it an' made it camp talk. Curse him for thet diskivery! Ther next time it'll be worse than Satan's Hotel!"

"Ther comin' ov thet other man gits me ther worst," said Silver Chick. "I can't forget how well he hoodwinked us as Vaquero Van, an' ef I hedn't accidentally struck Jeff Banning among ther mountains, he'd be gittin' in his bloody work by this time."

"Thet war a lucky find ov yers," replied the boss of Pistol City. "Yer hunt for ther person who cut Monte warn't a wild-goose chase arter all. It unmasked the dare-devil from the North."

The two pards had by this time reached Captain Noll's cabin, the door of which stood wide enough to let them see the interior of the place.

"In God's name whar's Monte Merle?"

This question leaped in accents of horror from Captain Noll's throat as he reached the door and flung it wide.

He had a right to speak thus.

The blankets on the rough floor had no occupant now.

Monte Merle, the 'Frisco gambler, had vanished!

The two pards had not been gone more than forty minutes from the cabin, and when they went away Merle was lying on the blankets under the influence of Doctor Pablo's sleeping potion.

Now not a trace of him was to be seen.

"Mebbe," said Silver Chick, "mebbe he got up an' staggered ter Holy Hank's."

"We'll see," was the answer.

It was no easy task for Silver Chick to keep up with Captain Noll as he ran over the ground toward the gambling-den of the gold camp.

He burst excited and like a thunderbolt into the famous place and startled all with his question:

"Is Monte Merle hyer?"

Even before an answer was given he saw that the monte king was not in the place.

The miner-roughs of Pistol City had seen nothing of him since he had been carried to Oregon Noll's shanty.

"Then he's wandered off in delirium!" cried Captain Noll. "Every corner ov ther camp must be searched for Monte Merle. Light yer torches an' begin at once. Twenty ounces ov dust ter ther man what finds him!"

The pards of the gold camp obeyed the desperado sport with alacrity, and in less than ten minutes torches were flitting through the darker portions of Pistol City like fire-flies.

Every corner of the camp was inspected, every cabin was visited and searched.

The excitement increased as the search went on.

It had been an eventful night for Pistol City, the most eventful one in its history.

Captain Noll and Silver Chick conducted the search with mad eyes and compressed lips, which opened now and then to let slip a curse of disappointment.

"We must look for Monte among the mountains," said Oregon Noll at last.

"Then he didn't leave camp alone; he hadn't the strength."

"What do you mean, Chick?"

"Only this," was the reply. "He's fallen into the hands ov some avenger!"

CHAPTER XIV.

WHERE MONTE MERLE WAS.

"GET up here. I want you!"

A beautiful young woman with blazing black eyes was beaming over a man asleep on some blankets in the light of a lamp that illumined the interior of a miner's cabin.

She had to give him several severe shakings before his eyes unclosed.

When they did open, they had a half meaningless stare in which he did not recognize the disturber of his peace.

"Want-me?" he drawled. "What for?" "You will see before the moon is much older," was the reply. "I failed when I struck you before; this time I will succeed!"

There was resolution, vengeance in the speaker's tones, and threatenings in her eyes.

"You can get up Monte Merle," she went on. "I am here to say that I shall not argue matters. Will you obey me, or shall I leave you here with a perforated head? Take your choice!"

The 'Frisco sport looked into the muzzle of the revolver that crept toward his forehead while the young woman spoke, then he glanced over the glittering barrel into the stern eyes.

The pistol was enough to awaken the most somnolent; but it was evident that Monte Merle was still under the influence of a drug of some kind.

"My God! I know you now!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I saw those eyes once before to-night; it was when I got your knife in my shoulder!"

"Yes," admitted the girl with animation. "I thought I had struck an effectual blow for vengeance. I did not think, Monte Merle, that I would have to strike you again!"

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"One who has a right to pay the debt of justice," was the quick answer. "But get up, and leave this cabin. I count three for you. One—two—"

Monte Merle, completely covered by the deadly weapon, got upon his feet and stepped toward the door.

His wound had paled his face, his eyes had an unnatural look, and his jetty locks fell over his shoulder in wild abandon.

The woman followed closely behind him with her finger at the trigger, and her eyes fixed on the man upon whom she had stolen like a tigress.

As Monte Merle crossed the threshold, he saw a horse led up to the door by a man who was stalwart like himself, and whose dress proclaimed him one of the permanent citizens of the gold camp.

"Can you get into the saddle, colonel?" his persecutor said to him.

"I can, but that is Silver Chick's horse!"

"What of it? All's fair in war, Monte Merle, and war this is."

The wily gambler-sport saw that he was caught, yet he wanted to delay events.

Delay was much to him.

The woman-avenger was playing a bold game in the heart of Pistol City, and a few moments' delay might bring one of the two great pard up and block her scheme.

"Look hyer," he said, wheeling upon the avenger. "You'd better drop this game where you are."

"And you had better mount that horse! By the Supreme Father! Monte Merle, I am in this part of golddom to kill, and it matters very little to me where my victims fall."

"Hades take her!" growled Monte Merle under his breath. "She doesn't scare worth a cent. And he drew himself painfully up into the saddle and looked down into the woman's face with eyes that said: 'Well, what next?'"

"Hold the reins and watch the monte sharp," she said to the man who had brought the horse before the door. "You will obey me in every particular," to the man in the saddle. "Now, forward! Red Roy."

"Red Roy?" echoed through Monte's head. "That man belongs to this camp. Captain Noll left 'Frisco several nights ago to suppress him. Well, he did not do his duty, for the villain is now in league with this black-eyed Nemesis."

The horse started off at a fast walk, with the well-built figure of Red Roy at his head.

The female hunter walked alongside with eyes riveted on her captive, and ready, as the cocked revolver in her hand showed, to send a bullet crashing through his brain at the first move on his part.

Red Roy led the horse between a row of cabins and toward the dark shadows of the mountains which the miners of Pistol City had honeycombed in their eager search for golden ore.

Sullen, and like a statue, the 'Frisco sport sat bolt upright in the saddle, grating his teeth against the pain that came from the almost fatal knife-stab in the shoulder.

"What are these two pards goin' to do with me?" he asked himself when the gaunt mountain rose before him against the starry heavens. "They dare not take my life. No, they will not carry their capture that far. They fear the vengeance of Captain Noll an' the whole crowd. But a madwoman knows no reason; nothin' daunts a pantheress when her blood is hot."

The horse went on led by the man whose miraculous escape from Satan's Hotel had astonished the whole camp, and pistol watched by the avenger at his side.

"Halt!" said the avenger at last much to Monte Merle's relief, for he was anxious to have the march conclude in some manner; any way would prove a relief to the strain of uncertainty then upon him.

The horse stopped and Red Roy looked to the speaker for orders.

The spot reached was in the center of a somewhat wide trail over which the moon hung in silvery beauty like a round shield suspended in the sky.

"Monte Merle," said the beautiful captor, "I declare myself and my intentions here. I am Leo the Trailer, and the trail I am on now I have sought ever since by eight men a young gold prospector was hung to a crag that jutted over a certain canyon in Colorado. Do you remember?"

Monte Merle could not suppress the start that betrayed his guilt to the speaker who was watching him with the tireless eyes of the serpent.

He bit his lip under his mustache, and shot Leo a look of defiance.

"What if I do remember that event?" he said.

"You must recollect that I was not alone."

"I'll get them all before I'm through with this blood-hunt!" was the quick retort. "You ought to feel honored, Monte Merle, that I take you first, because I leave your betters behind."

The 'Frisco desperado did not speak.

"Nature seems to have intended this place for your doom," the huntress went on. "Above your head is a gallows much like the one that served your dark purpose in Colorado."

Monte Merle instinctively cast his eyes upward and saw by the moonlight's aid a log like object that jutted out from the almost perpendicular mountain-wall about forty feet above his head.

He saw, too, that the sides of the trail-walls were covered with a profusion of tough creepers entirely strong enough to bear the weight of a man, and when he saw Red Roy take from under his coat a goodly coil of small but stout rope he seemed to imagine to what use the creepers would be put.

"Albert, the gold-hunter received no mercy from your hands," continued Leo looking still at the man in the saddle. "I have sworn that you shall receive none at mine."

"In Satan's name, what are you to him?" cried Monte Merle. "Are you his sister?"

A smile crossed the beautiful avenger's face.

"No, but he was as dear to me as if he were my brother," she said. "Your accursed rope separated us, Monte Merle, just when life was all sunshine, and shortly after that terrible event the yellow hand of a viper from the southern border robbed me of every relative I had in the world."

"None of us did that," said the 'Frisco sport.

"No. I know where *he* is, and I am here to crush the head of the Mexican serpent as well as to take vengeance for the hanging in the Colorado canyon."

The girl waved her hand toward the wall as she finished, and Red Roy stepped forward with the lasso in his hand.

She did not watch the rough from Pistol City as he seized hold of the vines and drew himself up, but continued to guard the man in the saddle.

Red Roy went toward the gallows hand over hand, climbing with the agility of an ape.

He seemed to take delight in the work before him for more than once he threw a triumphant look down at the man who chafed at the terrible peril he was in.

He at last reached a point from which he threw his double coil over the stone arm which jutted in a singular manner from the mountain-wall, and then let it drop until the two ends hung side by side almost touching the trail below.

A few moments later he struck the ground with a satisfied "Thar!" and turned to the mountain huntress.

"It is well done, Red Roy; now adjust the noose," was the response, and the man from Satan's Hotel took up one end of the rope and formed a noose in it so quickly as to call forth Monte Merle's secret commendation.

Almost before Monte could believe that the deftly-formed noose was ready for its victim, he saw something dart at him like a rattlesnake from its coil, and the lasso dropped over his head, and fell on his shoulders!

He raised his hands mechanically to tear it loose ere it tightened, but the voice of Leo the Trailer daunted him.

"Touch that rope and die!" she said. "However, Monte Merle, if you prefer cold lead to a lasso, tear the noose from your throat!"

He did not touch the rope, but dropped his hands with a hissing curse.

Red Roy now proceeded to fasten the other end of the rope around the body of the horse at the girth, so that when the animal should start forward, he would draw Monte Merle toward the beam overhead.

Once during the operation of tying the rope to the horse, the eyes of the two men met.

"It's no use, Monte," said Red Roy in a whisper. "I never met that girl before ter-night, but I'm her slave. Besides, yer pard Captain Noll banished me ter Satan's Hotel. Thet's enough!"

Monte Merle did not reply, but gave Red Roy a look which threatened dire vengeance if he ever got the upper hand.

Suddenly he burst forth in a terrible voice as he wheeled upon the avenger.

"By the fires of Tartarus! there shall be vengeance for this night's work!" he cried. "You may strike now, my Dakota scorpion, but you forget that you leave unhung some men who are fit to reign in the infernal regions!"

"I forget nothing!" was the cool answer.

"If I could forget, Monte Merle—if I could blot out the past—I would give life itself. But Heaven has implanted in my heart eternal remembrance. You will be swinging 'twixt earth and heaven before three minutes end. When I strike your horse he will dash forward and complete, so far as you are concerned, colonel, my sworn duty."

The speaker stepped to the steed and raised her hand.

"Count three, Red Roy," she said with a glance at the stalwart rough.

"Hold on thar!" rung out a voice before Red Roy began. "That man belongs to me."

"We'll test that *now*!" cried Leo the Trailer and she smote the steed heavily with her hand.

The horse sprung forward with promptness, and as Monte Merle was lifted into the air, Leo wheeled upon the stranger.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SEEDS OF VENGEANCE.

"CONFOUND you, woman! Don't you know who you are balking?" And the man who uttered these words sprung forward and seized the horse by the bit and began to force him back with both hands.

"I care not whom I balk!" answered Leo, as she started toward the interferer, a mad light in her eyes, and her finger playing nervously with the trigger of her revolver. "Leave that horse, or, by the golden stars above us, I'll drop you dead in your boots!"

The threat was unheeded.

"I've no objection to seeing Monte Merle pass in his chips, but I intend to say something about the manner of his going out," the stranger said. "Besides, woman, I've hunted this very monte sharp too long to be baffled at this stage of the game!"

He did not drop the reins his hands had seized, but fearless of the menacing revolver, continued to back the steed until Monte Merle, lowered by the operation, fell limp and senseless across the saddle.

Leo seemed fascinated by the man's daring.

"It is the fellow who calls himself Vaquero Van," muttered Red Roy, who had been held speechless in one spot by the scenes just described. "He got away slick an' clean from Captain Noll an' Silver Chick, an' now he turns up hyer in time ter block ther gal's game. Jehu! how cool he is! I wouldn't hev taken the chances ov thet girl shootin' ter save ther best friend I've got."

"I guess you don't want to shoot me," continued Cool Conrad—for he it was—looking Leo in the face. "This man will not be hanged to-night!"

"Will not, you say?" flashed the huntress, striding up to him. "Do not be too sure of that!"

The next moment the two stood face to face and looked into each other's eyes by aid of the moon.

"Ah! is it *you*?" suddenly cried Leo. "I did not recognize you in this disguise. You are still the older image of Albert."

"The brother thet villain helped to choke to death!" replied Cool Conrad, with a quick glance at Monte Merle. "And you hate him, too?"

"I do."

"How did he wrong you?"

Leo was silent, although a reply almost parted her lips before she choked it down.

"Never mind," she said, a minute afterward. "He and his fellows inflicted a wound which only their blood will heal. I thought—I hoped my warning would keep you in San Francisco."

Cool Conrad started perceptibly.

"Then, that letter came from you—then, you are 4-11-21?"

A smile of assent passed over the avenger's countenance.

"But you warned Oregon Noll also," he went on. "You made it possible for me to fall into Monte Merle's man-trap."

"Yes. I was working for my own revenge. I didn't want you to strike this mountain band before I could get my work in."

"I see!" exclaimed the detective. "You have made your double game quite clear to me. It was by chance that I escaped from that infamous man-trap, and got upon the trail of the men whose blood I seem to scent from afar. Look at that one on the horse. If your noose hasn't choked him he is yet my victim."

"I think, sir, he's completely wiped out," said Red Roy at this juncture. "Ef thet's ther case, he's past yer stroke, captain."

Cool Conrad turned to Monte Merle, and quickly removed the noose from around his neck.

Leo went up and looked for a moment into the face of the gambler-sport.

A sort of triumphant glare lit up her eyes.

In her opinion Monte Merle was dead, and she who had hunted him to the end had a right to rejoice.

But with Cool Conrad it was otherwise. "I'll take charge of this man," he said, quietly to the girl trailer.

"Take him," was the answer. "If you want the corpse of Monte Merle, there it is! But do not say that I effect nothing when I strike."

The noose that dangled near the ground had no human head in it this time; it swayed to and fro in the moonlight curiously watched by the young woman who seemed to see in it an agent of vengeance.

Cool Conrad put one hand out to steady the body on the saddle, and with the other caught the bridle rein.

"Let me tell you, miss, that if you expect to strike often in these parts, you'll have to look out for me," he said. "It seems that we hate the same men, that we have both sworn to get even with them for a mortal wrong. I shall not turn back—"

"Neither will I!" cried Leo. "I will not leave my trail until I have stood over the dead body of the last of the dastardly eight! Heaven has heard my vow. It is recorded in the Book of Oaths, and I will not quit my path till every vestige of it has been fulfilled! Listen to me!" continued Leo, and her voice sunk to a whisper as her hand fell upon the detective's arm. "Time will see who succeeds on this trail—you or I. If you want Monte Merle to bury him he is at your disposal, and," with a smile, "if you intend to play sexton in this country, Cool Conrad, Leo, the Trailer, will furnish you with subjects."

"All right, my lady," laughed the man-hunter. "You'll find playing sleuth-hound about Pistol City the most dangerous game you ever tried. Good-night! You know where the den of hyenas is. Let me give you a bit of advice. Whenever you enter the cage always keep your eyes on the beasts. Don't show 'em your back."

"Thanks," smiled Leo. "Take that same advice to yourself. Good-by, Cool Conrad!"

She stepped back and threw a quick glance at Red Roy, then put up the weapon which until that moment she had continued to hold cocked in her hand.

Red Roy stepped quickly to her side and looked into her face for orders.

Already that stalwart fellow—the man who had escaped from Satan's Hotel, and who would yet make his haters feel his teeth—seemed her slave.

The eyes of the California huntress seemed to fascinate him.

"Are you going with me?" she asked Red Roy. "Or are you going to follow Cool Conrad?"

"What'd I foller him for?" was the answer. "You hev but ter command Red Roy, Leo. Say 'Back ter ther hyenas' den,' an' back it shall be!"

"It shall not be back there now."

"When?"

"By and by. Do you want to go back?"

"Try me!" ejaculated the stalwart tough. "Don't I want ter pulverize the g'loots who made me a guest ov Satan's Hotel. I never saw yer afore ter-night that I know ov, but ther moment yer said yer war fightin' ther best part ov Pistol City, ther moment I war yer pard. When you lift yer hand, Leo, up goes mine! Yer look shall be law ter Red Roy, the outcast ov ther gold-camp."

His expression told Leo all that he said, and she knew that fate or fortune—at that time she knew not which—had sent her an ally who could be depended on under all circumstances and at all times.

Meanwhile Cool Conrad was leading Silver Chick's horse away, with the body of Monte Merle lying across the saddle.

"Thar'll be no tears dropped at that plantin'," continued Red Roy, as his eyes followed the horse and his burden. "That man-tracker put in a little too late, Leo. Monte Merle will never lift his hand fer revenge or fer his pards."

Slowly the figures of Cool Conrad and the horse disappeared in the moonlight, and when they had entirely vanished, Leo the Trailer turned away, followed by Red Roy.

"Who ar' ye goin' ter strike next?" asked the Pistol City outcast.

"The first one of the lot fortune throws across my path perhaps," was the reply. "But were I to choose, I'd like to encounter the Mexican viper."

"Doctor Pablo?"

"Doctor Pablo! Ah! don't I owe that serpent a score which I long to wipe out?"

"Heavens!" exclaimed Red Roy. "I b'lieve yer hate nearly all mankind."

"It is not so bad as that," answered the avenger, with a smile. "I shall never hate my friends."

"Which is one consolation; then Red Roy won't be hated."

"I hope not, except by the villains he would not number among his friends for the world."

"You won't tell why you hate the Mexican, I suppose?" said Red Roy, after a pause.

"I will," replied Leo, promptly. "Why should I refuse? Besides, the brief story of my

wrongs will serve to keep alive hatred for the meanest wretch that ever walked the earth."

The two had halted at the end of the mountain pass, and Red Roy leaned against a tree that grew near by and folded his arms on his ample chest a signal for the beautiful huntress to proceed.

"I'm not going to make it a long story," she began. "You want it all in a nutshell, and in that way I shall give it to you. When I was born, my parents lived on the Rio Grande a few leagues south of El Paso del Norte, which you know is near the northern frontier of Mexico. Father had a fine hacienda which was very valuable. Among his hands was a Mexican called at that time, Santa Cruz, because the city of that name was his birthplace. From my earliest childhood I distrusted that man, and the terrible events which his villainy brought about, proved that my distrust was not groundless. My oldest brother was twenty-one when the tragedy that still darkens the most beautiful part of the Rio Grande country took place. My next brother was eleven and the only sister younger still."

"Ah! I see!" exclaimed Red Roy. "4—11—21."

Leo smiled, nodded slightly, and continued:

"Father and I were coming home one night from a visit to a friend's ranch some fifteen miles down the river when we saw a light shoot heavenward from a point where our home seemed to be. Only a few days before father had given Santa Cruz a merited talking to for a certain rudeness toward Richard, my second brother, and the moment I saw that light, a terrible suspicion and foreboding of evil flashed across my mind. We galloped forward as fast as horseflesh could carry us, and were not long in reaching a rise from which the awful truth burst upon our vision. Our home was in flames, and the moment we beheld it, the roof fell in with a loud crash!

"No human power could stay the progress of that raging fire, and we, of course, were powerless. A number of our men who had been attending a fandango some miles away reached the scene about the same time of our arrival. Among them was Santa Cruz, but the moment his gaze met mine his eyes drooped. My God! it was the most terrible night of my existence. Were I to live a thousand years, it would not be effaced from my memory."

"Well, we had to let the fire take its course, and when it had licked up our once happy home we found the remains of mother and two brothers. My sister's bones were never found. The infamous incendiary had preceded his torch's work with murder for evidences of this were apparent on the corpses of our loved ones. Father did not survive the stroke more than two days; it overthrew his reason, and the faithful men buried him beside mother's grave. For a while it was feared I, too, would follow him, but heaven brought me through for vengeance. I then discovered that Santa Cruz left the hacienda almost before the fire had died away. It was proof of the fiend's guilt. Men hunted him with lassoes at their saddle-bows, but he got away. As a matter of course, I drifted from the terrible spot. I wanted to go to the ends of the earth it seemed. I came North. I found a friend in Dakota, but the rope of Monte Merle and his men took him. It put me on another trail, and one which, strange to say, ran into the very one lost long ago on the Mexican frontier. I have found Santa Cruz. Yes, Red Roy, in Doctor Pablo, the yellow serpent of Pistol City, I find the murderer and incendiary of Hermosa Hacienda."

When Leo paused her hand rested on one of Red Roy's arms, and she was looking into his face.

"By Jove! won't I twist his yaller neck!" hissed the gold-camp outcast. "Let me find the serpent!"

"You?" cried Leo. "You touch Doctor Pablo? If you do, Red Roy, the woman who hates him will turn on you. I will pay him back myself. He knows that I am on his track. I have told him to prepare for death. Come! we go, now!"

Leo ceased and stepped back, her eyes on fire.

CHAPTER XVI.

FLOSS GUARDS A SECRET.

NEARLY all through that eventful night Oregon Noll and Silver Chick kept up their search for the missing pard.

Monte Merle's disappearance mystified them not a little, and they were loth to give up the hunt without some satisfactory solution of the puzzle.

By and by Doctor Pablo joined them in the search, declaring that he had seen nothing of the Frisco sharp since the administering of the opiate, and the Mexican wondered how Monte Merle could get away without assistance.

While the search was at its height the events related in the preceding two chapters were occurring a short distance from the gold camp in the mountain pass.

If the two pards had dreamt of such things, how eagerly would they have moved on Leo, the Trailer, and her work!

Doctor Pablo after awhile disengaged himself from the two pards and gave up the hunt.

He did not like Silver Chick, and the fierce looks he darted at him told that his hatred was deep seated.

"You'd hold me up for the she wolf to claw at, would you?" hissed Doctor Pablo, eying Silver Chick for the last time ere he dismissed him from his sight. "When she comes you will stand between Doctor Pablo an' her knife until she is ready to plunge it into the heart she seeks? You'd do all this, eh, Silver Chick? *Sacrista!* you must watch if you want to play this bold game. When you get ahead ov Doctor Pablo, the moon will turn to ice."

Morning broke again over Pistol City with the mystery of Monte Merle's going away still unsolved.

Oregon Noll was the sole occupant of his shanty when the door was pushed open, and the face of Pure-Gold Floss, his *protegee*, appeared.

"Hello!" ejaculated the sport at sight of the girl. "You've been up all night, hev'n't you, Floss?"

"No. While you men were awake I've been sleeping," was the answer as the speaker came forward, and leaned against the table near which Captain Noll occupied a three-legged stool.

"Mebbe you've been dreamin' ag'in!" laughed the desperado. "Ef you hev, girl, just give me ther benefit ov yer dreams. You did see a man drop through a certain floor in 'Frisco, an' also the fellar what rode from 'Frisco toward Pistol City an' got hyer with a knife in his shoulder. You saw all thet in a dream, I say. Now didn't you dream out Monte Merle's wharabouts while ye slept last night?"

"I did not, I'm sorry to say," was the reply. "You haven't found him yet?"

"No; but we will!" said Captain Noll. "He warn't in a condition ter git far without help."

"But who would help him away?"

"Somebody who hates all ov us," spoke the gold sport through clinched teeth. "Do you know, girl, thet Red Roy has come to life—that he didn't stay confined in Satan's Hotel?"

Oregon Noll leaned forward and gave Floss a curious and scrutinizing look while he put the question.

"I know he lives," she said without hesitation.

"Then do you know who helped him from the hole?"

"How should I know?"

A spasm of rage came to the gold pard's face, and his hand darted forward like the tongue of a serpent and clutched her arm.

"That's not what I asked you," he continued in stern tones. "I don't want you to prevaricate with me, Floss. I'm one ov those g'loots thet don't put up with double work. I'm Oregon Noll, the man who painted the northern borders red not a thousand years ago. Tell me the truth. Look me in the eyes, Floss, and tell me you don't know who helped Red Roy out ov Satan's Hotel if ye dare! I've been yer best friend for years, an' you can't afford ter go back on Oregon Noll now. Tell me!"

For a moment Pure-Gold Floss looked into the speaker's face, but not with fear and trembling. Merciless as his eyes were, they did not seem to terrorize her.

"What if I should say that he got out by himself?" she said.

"I'd not b'lieve it; thet's all!" was the quick retort. "He couldn't get out without help with thet candle burnin' ther rope off. No suppositions, girl. I want ther solid fact. You know who lent Red Roy a helping hand, an' you must tell me."

He had left his stool and now stood over the girl with blazing eyes, and with his fingers sinking as it were through her arm to the bone.

"By heavens! you must speak the truth to me!" he went on, with increasing fierceness. "I'm master hyer—ther boss hyena ov this collection. Who did it? Open yer mouth, Floss!"

Already the eyes of the girl lit up with defiance.

"If I have been under your eyes these long years, you cannot force from me what I have resolved not to divulge," she said with firmness as her lips whitened.

"Then, you know; then, my pretty thing, you know who helped Red Roy?"

The eyes of the girl said "I know!" in a manner not to be misinterpreted, and Oregon Noll drew back with a muttered oath.

"Very well," he continued. "You don't leave this shanty till I've got yer secret. Ah! try ter twist out ov my hands an' see what a grip I've got! I'm worse than a vise when I git a hold on anything. Playin' double on Oregon Noll, ar' ye? Thet's a mighty dangerous game in this camp, Floss!"

There was no reply, only Pure-Gold Floss drew back a pace, as if to test the desperado's grip.

"You'll out with it now, won't you?" he grinned. "You'll whisper ther name ov Red Roy's helper, won't yer?"

"I cannot!"

"You shall! See hyer; I'm liable ter throw ye ag'in' the door an' mash yer!"

"All right," said Floss, calmly. "You do so at your peril, Captain Noll."

"What's that?" cried the bronzed villain. "Do you threaten Oregon Noll in his own shanty—you, a baby girl?"

"I do!" exclaimed the girl, giving him look for look. "This is Pistol City, I know; but you are not my master!"

"Come, don't be a fool, Floss. Let's compromise. Tell me who helped Red Roy from Satan's Hotel, and I'll give you the true history of your life."

"No; you can't buy me that way," was the quick retort.

"Then I'll get it in another manner."

He loosened the girl so suddenly that she staggered back, almost losing her balance; and Oregon Noll, with a quick movement, threw himself between her and the door.

"You don't get out of here until you've peached on Red Roy's helper!" he hissed, in a mad voice. "I run this boat, Floss, my child. You've forgotten that you've disobeyed Captain Noll."

"I forget nothing," said the girl, who had shrunk to the table which stood midway between the door and the wall. "You may stand there and threaten till the roof of this cabin crumbles with age over our heads, Captain Noll. I don't betray my friends."

The ruffian laughed.

He evidently thought he had the best of the parley, and he knew that Floss could get out by no other way than the door against which he had braced himself with an air of triumph.

All at once Floss glided forward with her eyes fixed on Oregon Noll.

"Don't you think you could be better employed hunting Monte Merle?" she said. "I have told you that you cannot get any secrets out of me."

"That remains to be seen. See here; I give you just two minutes in which to make up your mind. Only two minutes, girl."

"Make it shorter than that if you wish," was the cool rejoinder. "My mind is already made up."

Floss saw one of his feet glide toward her as she finished, but she did not recoil.

"One minute's up," he said. "I'll cut your other mighty short if you don't mind!"

"Suit yourself, Captain Noll."

The remaining minute passed amid profound silence, and on wings of swiftness, too.

"Time up!" suddenly ejaculated Captain Noll, as he made a hasty step forward. "Now, my double-dealing angel, give me the truth!"

In another moment he would have swooped down upon the seemingly helpless girl if something bright had not flashed before his eyes.

It was a knife in the hand of Pure-Gold Floss!

She still stood braced against the table, her eyes on fire again and the gleaming blade which she had jerked from concealment on her person held menacingly before her face.

Captain Noll halted and then went back a pace with an ejaculation of surprise.

"I draw this against you only in the direst extremity," said Floss firmly.

"But you wouldn't use it on Oregon Noll?" he tried to laugh.

"I do not want to," was the reply; "but I do not ask you to attempt coercion."

Ah! how her eyes snapped while she uttered these words.

"I didn't think I had found a tigress when I picked you up years ago," he said. "I think you must have been advised by your young ratter we've harbored in Pistol City—Marmoset."

"What I do—what I have done—is my own work. Marmoset has never been my adviser."

"But he's a cute one—a sly serpent, anyhow. I'm a-goin' to have an interview with him afore long—maybe afore sundown. So you won't give Red Roy's helper away?"

"I will not!"

"An' you will tickle me with that knife if I persist?"

"Do not try me!"

"You couldn't get in more'n one stroke, and I'd ward that off," Oregon Noll went on. "I guess I'll let you go, but I'll get to the bottom of your secret afore dark. I'm disgusted with womankind. I never thought I was raisin' you for work like this, Floss. What if I should go clear back on you? I'm liable to do some strange things, I am—when I'm mad."

He stepped aside, and, as he finished, waved his hands toward the door.

"Go, an' rejoice with your pard over the secret you think you've kept!" he cried. "Tell him that I'm goin' to kill the person who helped Red Roy out of Satan's Hotel, and I've got a good idea of his identity. Make him your pard; turn on the man who saved you at the risk of his own life from a prairie fire. Go home! Go to Marmoset."

Floss gave him a look that still breathed defiance, but made no reply and took a step toward the door.

At that moment the voices of men entered the cabin, and as Oregon Noll turned to see what the matter was, the door flew open and both he and his rebellious *protegee* saw the horrified face of Silver Chick.

"My God! Noll!" cried the desperado-Apollo. "Monte Merle's come back and on my horse, too!"

"No!" cried Captain Noll in an incredulous voice springing into the light. "What is he?"

"Over yonder where the crowd is," said Silver Chick pointing to a crowd of miner-roughs who were congregated about a horse.

"Go on! look at the poor pard. By heavens! if their sight don't make your blood boil, you're made of stone!"

Captain Noll waited for nothing more, but bounded toward the group watched and followed by Silver Chick who did not seem to have noticed the girl.

"Here's the cap'n!" said a dozen men as Oregon Noll came up, and the crowd parted to let him inside.

Half a minute later the bronze boss of Pistol City stood before the horse which had just come back to camp with a terrible burden.

Strapped to the saddle, with his white face turned toward the calm heavens overhead, was the once proud monte king of San Francisco.

He was dead, but still warm, and in his breast stuck a knife whose polished ivory handle glistened in the sunlight.

"Great God! who did this?" cried Captain Noll. "If this war Satan's work I would call him to account for it in the depths of Hades!"

"Don't you know who did it?" cried Silver Chick. "Who got away from us last night?"

"The Dakota Tiger!"

"Cool Conrad he calls himself. Hold! there's suthin' clutched in Monte's hand! By Jove! the killer has the impudence to send a message to Pistol City with his dead prey!"

Eager to see the contents of the dead hand, Silver Chick pried the fingers apart by main strength and tore from their clutch a piece of white paper scarcely three inches square.

The crowd watched him while he mastered the writing visible on the paper, and Captain Noll started forward.

"Read!" said Silver Chick, thrusting the note into his pard's hand. "I was right. The man-hunter did the work."

Already Captain Noll had mastered the contents of the paper for they were brief, and as follows:

"PARDS OF PISTOL CITY:—

"This is but the beginning!"

CONRAD, THE AVENGER."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

"All right! I'm ready!"

Oregon Noll wheeled upon the crowd and held the paper, the challenge, the warning, over his head.

When he announced its contents to the pards of Pistol City, a tigerish yell full of vengeance and defiance went toward the heavens.

"That means me, I reckon," spoke a man who stood on a rock along the mountain-side some distance above the gold camp, but near enough to hear the echoes of that yell and to see the crowd that surrounded the dead Frisco sport.

Of course, the solitary speaker was Cool Conrad, but he no longer wore the striking garments with their braid which he had forced from Jeff Banning, the vaquero.

He now stood erect in dark pants and grayish shirt, not very much like the sleek man who had fallen into the man-trap in San Francisco.

"Yes! wolves of Pistol City, as I said on the paper I sent by the dead, this is but the beginning. The end may not be far away. Stand there and shout your yells of defiance. Yell till you're hoarse! You can't weaken my arm in that manner, nor dim the aim that covers you all. Found out as Vaquero Van, I must take another turn on you. I shall teach you that a snake should be killed when first seen. If let go, it will turn on you and bite!"

Cool Conrad disappeared unseen by the men of the mountain camp, not one of whom dreamed that he had witnessed the reception of his message brought in by the dead.

He did not stay to see Monte Merle taken from the saddle and laid out on the floor of Captain Noll's cabin; he did not see the fierce looks of Silver Chick and all the rest, nor hear the dreadful oath of vengeance sworn over Holy Hank's bar.

While these events were taking place, Floss, the girl, stole back to the cabin, and having armed herself there, went to the shanty occupied by Marmoset.

The boy met her at the door, excitement and curiosity in his eyes.

"You are in danger!" were her first eager words.

"From whom?"

"Captain Noll. He more than suspects you."

"Of what?"

"Of assisting Red Roy from Satan's Hotel."

The boy did not speak for a moment.

"I shall face the danger when it comes!" he said, bravely, from between clinched teeth.

"It will not be long delayed," exclaimed the girl. "The last act has fired the desperado's blood. Monte Merle has come back with a bowie in his breast, and the Dakota Detective has proclaimed his work with audacious boldness. Captain Noll more than suspects you, I

say. He will see you before sundown. The whole camp will rise against you if he lifts his hand."

"Then," said Marmoset with a smile, "then, I am expected to fly."

"Would it not be best?" asked the girl anxiously. "You cannot face Captain Noll and all the rest."

"But to turn my back to them—I hate that!"

"Your life is at stake."

"Perhaps."

"I know it is. I know that camp hyena."

"And you advise me to leave Pistol City?"

"I do. It is for your own good. You must not get mixed up in the red drama soon to be played here."

"I will go, but not between two days," said Marmoset. "No man shall say that I sneaked from Pistol City after dark like a thief. No! I shall seek the mountains in the broad light of day. I helped Red Roy from Satan's Hotel because he was my friend. I will help a friend at any time and under all circumstances. Did Captain Noll say he would see me before sundown?"

"Yes."

"Then he will have to do so soon."

Marmoset began to put his little cabin in order for immediate departure.

Something more important than his personal safety impelled him to flee.

He knew he was not strong enough to face the men-hyenas of Pistol City, but it was not that.

There was something in the girl's voice and in her look that resolved him into a fugitive from the camp where he had spent so many pleasant days.

Now that Karl the Kid had been lost in Pure-Gold Floss, the desperado's *protegee*, he felt drawn closer than ever to his beautiful young friend.

She had prevailed upon him to fly, when, under any other advice, he would have stayed and braced the storm.

If the camp should discover that he had saved Red Roy from a terrible doom in Satan's Hotel, his chances for life would vanish like mists before the sun.

The whole pack would swoop down upon him, blood-hungry and relentless, and in the twinkling of an eye, as it were, rend him limb from limb.

Better a dose of Doctor Pablo's deadly medicine than a fate like this!

Marmoset saw Floss withdraw while he prepared for flight.

He told her that he would see her again before a great while, for he said, stubbornly and while his eyes flashed, that he had no notion of quitting the gold region, even though Captain Noll and all his band wanted his neck to grace their merciless nooses.

At the end of thirty minutes after the girl's departure, Marmoset found himself ready to bid Pistol City adieu.

There was still in his breast a deep-seated aversion to flight.

"It looks cowardly!" he said to himself. "I used to say that, of all things, I would never be a runaway, yet, here I am, flying to the mountains because Floss tells me that Captain Noll thinks I saved Red Roy from Satan's Hotel. I hate a coward! Marmoset, I hate you. But I have promised Floss, and go I will."

He stepped to the door and looked out.

The sun, high in the heavens, was shining brightly, and the song-birds of the wonderful gold-region of the Merced were delighting nature with their happy carols.

Pistol City lay quiet in the warm light of the god of day.

Not a suspicion of evil disturbed the scene; everything breathed of peace.

"Good-by, old cabin," said Marmoset, looking back at his little home as he stepped forth. "When this game has been played through, I'll come back and inhabit you again."

He drew the door shut behind him and threw a quick glance down the street.

Nobody seemed to notice his flight.

In another moment he would have been on his way to the mountains, but his flight was suddenly and startlingly prevented.

The door of a cabin hardly twenty yards distant was suddenly flung open, and a stern, "Halt!" struck his ears.

Marmoset stopped instantly in his tracks, and saw the stalwart man who covered him with a repeating rifle from the doorway.

Captain Noll!

This name flashed across the boy's brain at the first glance, but he did not utter it aloud.

Yes, his confronter was the boss of the gold-camp, and his eye was flashing like a tiger's behind the leveled rifle.

"Thought you'd git away, eh?" came over the weapon in sneering but triumphant tones. "When you steal a march on this California Chick, you'll know it, my young daisy. You're not goin' off just yet. Just march back into that cabin and stay there till you're ordered out. I war never suckled at ther breast of mercy. I'm a wolf, without one fang missin'. March!"

Marmoset had been taken completely by surprise.

The very man whom he had hoped to avoid

had stolen a march on him, and he was at his mercy.

Captain Noll seemed in his element.

Before him stood the person who had allowed Red Roy to escape his vengeance, and his sharp eyes told him that Marmoset was prepared for flight.

The cabin in whose door the villain stood was not his; but he had taken possession of it for the purpose of watching the youth's home, which he had seen the girl enter.

Did he believe that Floss's visit was to be succeeded by flight?

Captain Noll was a shrewd scoundrel; his brain was liable to get to the bottom of any problem.

Marmoset, after looking coolly over the rifle-barrel for some moments and counting the chances, moved back toward his cabin.

"Never mind, Captain Noll," he said, under his breath. "You've got the upper hand for the present, but we'll see who has it when the end comes."

"That's sensible!" ejaculated the desperado, seeing the boy's movement. "I'd go back too, ef I war in yer situation. I warn you not ter poke yer head out o' thet shanty without orders. I run this camp pretty much as I please, an' afore you're through with Oregon Noll, you'll find that he's court, jedge an' jury. Ef I hed yer pard, Red Roy, hyer, I'd drop him at yer feet!"

Marmoset did not reply.

He had already reached the threshold of his little home, but not for a single second had he taken his eyes from the devil of the gold-camp.

Oregon Noll's eyes glistened when he saw the success of his movement.

"For an ounce ov dust, I'd hev touched ther trigger, but I'll settle with yer ter-night," he growled. "Don't think thet ye'll not be watched, Marmoset. All day thar'll be ther sharpest eyes on ye ter be found in Pistol City."

The door of the boy's cabin had closed on him again, but Oregon Noll could not look inside.

No, he could not see Marmoset standing in the middle of the room, mad beyond description, nor hear the threats made for the interference.

Oregon Noll was not long keeping his word.

In less than ten minutes two miner-toughs whom Marmoset well knew entered a cabin directly opposite his own, and presently he saw their bronzed faces at the window.

"Watched already and by two men whose orders are undoubtedly to shoot me down if I attempt to leave my cabin," he said. "I know Brown Dan and Keno King well enough to know thet they will obey Captain Noll's orders to the letter. And yet I must submit. It grinds me to be a prisoner in my own shanty; but it can't be helped now."

No; across the narrow street of the camp two pairs of flashing eyes were watching him, and Marmoset gave them look for look from his window, until the sun dropped again behind the western cliffs.

Had Monte Merle been added to the silent sleepers who rested under the mountain's brow in the little graveyard fenced in with wild hedge?

The boy did not know.

Often during the day he wondered where Floss was.

The girl had not come back.

Perhaps Captain Noll had prevented her; perhaps she was being watched, like himself, by eyes as keen as those of his own watchers.

It was a long imprisonment for the boy.

It was sundown now; why didn't Captain Noll come with the expected accusation?

Marmoset had resolved to deny nothing.

His confinement had made him fearless and defiant.

He would admit that he had saved Red Roy from death in Satan's Hotel, that he had crept from his cot and succored the big tough, while Doctor Pablo was hunting him everywhere.

After the sun had gone down the shadows grew long, and Marmoset could with difficulty see the gleaming eyes of the human tigers placed on guard by the chief desperado of the mining-camp.

All at once he was startled by a slight noise like a rat gnawing overhead.

It was repeated while he listened for see he could not, for the interior of his cabin was quite dark, and so he drew a knife and kept his ears on the alert.

A short time told Marmoset that some one was on the roof of the cabin trying to remove the clap-boards there.

He was certain of it now.

"I'll wait here for the night rat," he said with a smile, halting directly under the unseen person at work. "I am ready for anything—even to a tussle in the dark. I am not going to be assassinated without a fight. You will find me awake, Captain Noll, and your agents will find me ready for them at all times."

The noise overhead was a puzzle to Marmoset.

Who was trying to get to him, and for what?

The boy forgot the two men across the camp street; he no longer thought of Captain Noll's spies who had watched his home like hawks, and who were still watching it for that matter.

He was waiting for the person on the roof; whether friend or foe, he was ready for him.

Suddenly Marmoset caught the gleam of a star where he had seen none a moment before, but the next moment it disappeared!

Sealing his lips close, the youth stepped back and clutched his knife with firmer grip.

It was a wild, thrilling moment for Marmoset.

The person on the roof had made a way for himself, and the disappearance of the star told the waif of Pistol City that he was actually coming down to him.

Two minutes of indescribable suspense followed, and then something dropped at Marmoset's feet, so near them that he felt the brush of a hand.

"Ar' ye hyer, boy?" asked a voice.

Marmoset started; an exclamation almost shot from between his lips.

"I am here!" he said. "If you are an enemy, I have a knife for you; if my friend, a hand without the blade!"

The next instant a hand shooting through the gloom closed on the boy's arm, and before he could lift the weapon which he clutched, he was drawn forward.

"Help for help!" whispered a coarse voice. "By ther stars above, Marmoset, they've got a lasso ready for yer neck. I'm ther galoot yer helped out ov Satan's Hotel."

"Red Roy!" leaped to Marmoset's lips.

"Thet's me! We hev'n't got five minutes ter bank on. Hyer! git upon my shoulders an' climb through the hole in the roof. Ef I don't pay Captain Noll an' pards for their little game, shoot me for a gopher!"

Marmoset could not reply before he found himself lifted to his big friend's shoulders, and the next moment he drew himself into the starlight on the roof.

He was not escaping too soon, for he saw a crowd of wild men rush pell-mell from Holy Hank's saloon.

They were headed by Oregon Noll.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE HYENA'S CLUTCHES.

"DROP to ther ground an' be easy an' quick about it," said a voice below the boy who seemed to be held spellbound by the sight of the crowd which had just rushed from the famous gambling-den.

Marmoset did not hesitate a moment, but lowered himself from the roof and dropped to the ground without noise.

He had hardly touched *terra firma* ere Red Roy landed at his side.

"Ar' ye armed, Marmoset?" asked the tough.

"Yes," said the boy laying his hand on one of his trusty revolvers.

"Then, we're both well heeled," was the answer. "Now, we'll get away so that when they search ther nest they'll find it empty."

Keeping the cabin between them and the mob advancing upon it from Holy Hank's, Red Roy and Marmoset glided away with fingers at triggers ready to be used at a moment's notice.

The late guest of Satan's Hotel looked proudly at the youth who walked at his side.

There was triumph in his eyes.

He was saving Marmoset from the clutches of Captain Noll, his own bitter enemy, and this seemed glory enough for Red Roy for one night.

If he had not come in the nick of time, the dare-devils of Pistol City, inflamed with whisky and led by Oregon Noll, would have made swift work of the object of their dislike.

"By George! I'd like ter creep back thar an' see how ther men-grizzlies take their disappointment," said Red Roy, halting on the edge of the gold camp, and looking anxiously and with eagerness toward the cabin just deserted.

"They'll growl, no doubt," smiled Marmoset.

"Growl?" echoed Red Roy. "They'll proceed ter turn things upside down. Won't thar be weepin', wailin' an' gnashin' ov teeth when they diskoiver ther hole thet let ther bird out?"

Red Roy overcame his desire to go back and turned away again.

He could not see Captain Noll and his pards reach the cabin.

In front of it the desperado sport was joined by the two spies who had guarded Marmoset from the shanty opposite the greater part of the day just past.

They reported that the coast was clear, and that the boy, Red Roy's young friend, was to be found in the cabin.

With eyes ablaze with madness, Oregon Noll crept up to the door and pushed it open.

"Hyers a few friends, Marmoset," he said, supposing he was addressing the boy. "Why don't yer come forward an' see 'em?"

There was no reply, and the interior of the cabin was too dark to show the bronzed speaker that it had no tenant.

A moment later, however, a lucifer cracked in Captain Noll's hand, and he held it above his head as he leaned forward to inspect the place.

"Gone!" he hissed, and then with a terrible oath he whirled upon the two guards.

"Is this ther way you watch my prisoners?" he yelled. "What kind ov eyes hev yer got, anyway?"

Brown Dan and Keno King were dumfounded. They could not believe that the cabin was un-

tenanted; they were ready to swear that Marmoset had not escaped by the door.

"By the door? No! he went up through ther roof!" was the sudden ejaculation. "Thar'll be a hangin' in Pistol City for all afore mornin' ef we ketch ther young daisy. Confound it! I could kick myself ter death. I never thought ov a guard all around ther shanty."

To say that Oregon Noll was mad would not express the truth; he was furious.

In his unbounded rage he kicked the deal table over and committed other acts of pure wantonness.

It was a signal for his half-drunken companions to follow his example, and to improve on his devilishness.

In less than five minutes from the discovery of Marmoset's absence not a whole piece of furniture remained in the cabin.

The destruction was terrible and complete, and if the hunted boy had been found he would have been treated to a noose amid yells of delight.

"The girl had a hand in it!" said Oregon Noll to himself. "Ten chances to one that she went off with him," and gliding from the crowd he walked straight and furious toward Floss's cabin.

Nobody followed the king ruffian of the camp, and he reached the place unhalting.

"She sha'n't replay the game she played in my shanty this morning," he growled to himself when he stopped in front of the girl's home and prepared to invade it. "Lies will not do her any good at this stage of the game," and his hand struck the door in several mad raps.

To these there was no reply, and all at once Oregon Noll gave the door a kick which sent it flying inward.

He almost expected to look into a revolver's muzzle for his action, but none appeared, and his rage turned to chagrin.

"Is this nest empty also?" he flashed. "By ther livin' soul! I'll chaw something up if this thing continues!"

He bounded across the threshold of the cabin and struck a match.

"Well, Captain Noll," said a voice behind him, "we meet for the first time, I believe."

Before the sentence was finished, the desperado had wheeled upon the speaker, whom he found to be a woman with flashing black eyes and with a revolver in her hand.

The match almost fell from Captain Noll's hand, but curiosity and amazement kept it there.

"Who ar' you?" exclaimed the tough. "You say we meet for the first time. I don't know you."

"Perhaps not, but you are not unknown to me. Do you think I would fail to recognize the man I have hunted so long?"

"When did I ever hit you?"

"When your lasso strangled the young gold-hunter in the Colorado canyon."

"Then you're his sister—"

"No. He was dear to me, though I am not his sister. All the same, his death drew from me an oath of revenge. I know, and so do you, Oregon Noll, that there is another hunter on your track. It is a race between him and me for the goal of justice. Come out into the moonlight, Captain Noll."

The desperado did not hesitate a moment, but stepped from the cabin into the brilliant moonlight that flooded the ground.

"Yes, I have looked long for you. At times I almost despaired of finding the masked eight who committed that heinous offense in the Colorado canyon," continued the woman, who was Leo the Trailer. "One of your band met his punishment awhile ago. I hanged Monte Merle and turned him over to the man who wanted his blood."

"To Cool Conrad?"

"To the Dakota Detective—Albert's brother!"

"An' thet rascal sent Monte back ter camp tied ter Silver Chick's horse with a paper in his dead hand. The paper said that he had wiped Monte out."

"It is not true!" cried Leo. "My rope, not his bowie, did the avenging. Now, Captain Noll, stand erect if you are not a coward."

"What ar' ye goin' ter do?"

"What should I do?" was the quick response. "I am going to shoot you down in cold blood."

"Hyers?"

"Where you stand!"

Leo stepped back a pace and raised her pistol. Oregon Noll, tall and stalwart, with the moonlight on face and figure, presented a striking target for the beautiful avenger's aim.

"This is murder, woman," he said.

A low laugh parted Leo's lips.

"Murder? What was the hanging in the canyon?" she asked derisively. "Angels wept at that brutal killing, they will rejoice at this just one! You die! Captain Noll, with the assurance that the rest of your pards will not be far behind you. I will get them all—Silver Chick, the handsome, included. Look up at the stars; take a farewell of the earth you have cursed so long with your presence, for the finger of Leo the Trailer is at the trigger!"

That last sentence was spoken in a manner which told that the woman had forever ceased to address the villain.

She looked sternly into Captain Noll's face over the barrel of her leveled weapon.

Did the desperado-sport look his last at the sky?

No; his figure seemed to increase an inch in stature and he glared at Leo like a tiger.

He might have seen the figure that was coming up behind the beautiful avenger—the cat-like, yet human, figure that crept, stride by stride, over the ground without the least noise.

If he saw it, it was why he did not say "good-by" to the world around him.

All at once the creeper stopped a few feet from the Trailer.

It was a man whose face was dark and in whose head burned a pair of mad eyes.

All at once he leaped at Leo with the leap of a jungle tiger that bolts upon the prey he has tracked down.

A cry half-human, half-brutish welled from his throat as he alighted against the avenger, taking her completely by surprise, and almost throwing her off her balance.

"*Sacrista!* Doctor Pablo holds in his clutches the viper that came to Pistol City to string him to death!" was hissed in her ear. "She had better have hunted him first!"

Leo tried to escape from the clutches of her captor, but he held her fast.

"In your hands?" she cried, glaring at him. "Don't call yourself Doctor Pablo to me. I know you as Santa Cruz, the meanest snake that ever crawled. Your infamous touch chills the blood in my veins! Unhand me, villain!"

Of course the command was not obeyed.

The Mexican's answer was a fiendish laugh which only made his eyes dart forth lightnings of fury.

"Don't choke the woman ter death!" suddenly cried Captain Noll, as his hand landed on the hand which had darted at Leo's throat. "You forget, doctor, that this is Pistol City an' that I'm boss hyer."

"*Peste*, no! You forget that this northern viper wants my blood!" was the retort. "Hands off till I throw her at your feet choked to death!"

"Not hyer!" and Oregon Noll's hand wrenched the Mexican's grip from his victim's throat. "She wants my life as well as yours, an' I hev a say in this matter."

"And so have I!" cried Leo, at that moment forcing herself from Doctor Pablo's grip.

"She has escaped!" exclaimed the Mexican. "You have given the viper freedom, captain; but I will choke her yet!"

Doctor Pablo saw only the woman who had started back, and, heedless of Captain Noll, he sprung at her again.

This time he met with a resistance that told how desperate was the avenger from the Northwest.

Leo raised her revolver and fired full at the sallow villain's breast, and the next second he fell back with a wild cry on his lips!

"I had hoped to torture you; but you have forced me to slay you instantly," she said, as the man struck the ground. "I feel that I have but half-avenged the deed committed on Hermosa Hacienda, though I have killed the demon who planned and worked it out."

"Thet's all right so far as ther doctor goes!" cried Oregon Noll. "But I'm left, my mountain tigress, an' I'll end this game to-night!"

Leo was quick but this time the stalwart miner-rough was the quickest.

She was in his clutches before she could send him after Doctor Pablo; a mad bound had secured her.

"You've settled with the doctor," laughed Captain Noll, "now, the hull camp will settle with the woman who hanged Monte Merle. Come with me. We'll find ther gold seraphs at Holy Hank's!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A BIRD IN THE HAND.

At the same time that witnessed the turning of the tables on Leo, and her capture by Oregon Noll, a well-built man came into camp from the mountains, and was soon lost to view among the cabins.

If he had been a spy he might have seen Captain Noll conducting his beautiful captive toward Holy Hank's infamous den—a place where she was likely to be received with curses and yells of rage.

"Don't you know that you're in a bad box?" said a voice so near the camp's visitor that he turned with a slight start and laid his hand on the butt of one of his heavy revolvers.

"A bad box, my girl?" he smiled, on seeing that the speaker was a young girl. "You would not call Pistol City a good box for Cool Conrad, would you?"

"Far from it," was the answer; "but I am here, and not likely to go away at anybody's command."

"Heavens! how they want you! The note you sent back in Monte Merle's dead hand made tigers of them all."

"I thought it would r'ile them. I did not do it ter set 'em in good humor."

Cool Conrad ended his last sentence with another smile.

He had penetrated again to the center of the gold camp unperceived, as he thought, but he had been seen by Floss, Captain Noll's *protegee*, and she now stood beside him, and was telling him that the men-hyenas of the California "city" wanted his blood.

He knew that—that the girl, whose intentions were good, was only resinging an old song, as it were.

Of course they wanted him, and on the other hand, he wanted certain men who had years before committed one of the most brutal crimes ever committed between canyon walls.

"Yes," continued Cool Conrad, after a brief pause. "This is the worst den of hyenas I ever struck. I expected to strike my first blow in 'Frisco, but the man-trap at Monte Merle's prevented. That incident confirmed what I had before discovered—that I was on the right trail."

"Your escape was miraculous, Silver Chick seems to think."

"Perhaps it was. Anyhow, I got out of the trap. I didn't come down to 'Frisco to die under Monte's faro palace. I came for revenge!"

"Do you think they won't recognize you?" asked the girl. "You have discarded the dress of the vaquero, that is true, but your eyes haven't changed color. Do you think Oregon Noll and Silver Chick won't know you?"

"I'm willing to risk their wonderful powers of penetration," said the avenger detective.

"I fear you overrate your own powers this time."

"Very well, girl. I heard a pistol-shot a few minutes ago. Who touched the trigger?"

"I don't know. The shot was fired near my cabin. Hark! what's that?"

"The howls of the hyenas at Holy Hank's."

Side by side the two persons listened to the loud voices of men in confusion and rage that the cool winds of night wafted down the camp thoroughfare.

"Something of importance has happened up there," said Cool Conrad. "Mebbe Captain Noll is delivering Monte Merle's funeral oration."

"They buried him at sundown," said Floss.

"Planted him in order, eh?"

"In madness, I should say."

"Where is their graveyard?"

"At the foot of this street. There are two fresh graves there now."

"Two?"

"Yes. Monte Merle's, and the grave of the man Red Roy shot when the crowd attempted to hold him at Holy Hank's."

"Which grave is Monte Merle's?"

"The one with head-boards, I am told; the common rough's grave has none."

Cool Conrad drew back from the girl and looked down the street.

"I'll see you later," he said suddenly, and the next moment he darted away leaving Floss to follow him with wondering eyes.

"He's a strange man," she said to herself.

"He turns from the living to the dead. If he lives to play his wild drama through, he will never more be Cool Conrad."

Already the avenger detective had disappeared, and Pure-Gold Floss was at liberty to make any movement that suited her.

She did not remain long on the spot, but glided away, going up the street toward Holy Hank's in-stead of following Cool Conrad toward the mountain cemetery.

"I will see what keeps the camp roughs excited," she said, halting near the open door of the gambling-den. "Ah! there goes Captain Noll's voice. Whose name was that he spoke? Heavens! have the hyenas caught a captive—a woman?"

Floss sprung forward and did not halt in front of the door, but applied her eye to a crack between the weather-boarding, and looked breathlessly into the place.

At first she saw only a crowd of dark-faced men, every one of whom she knew, for the greater part of her life had been passed among them.

She saw the figure of Oregon Noll in the den, and all his band with the single exception of Silver Chick who was notably absent.

"They've got somebody in their clutches," said Floss as she watched the men a moment. "The wretches are more or less drunk, and mad enough to take the life of a child."

At that moment the crowd parted and an exclamation of horror rose from the young girl's throat.

"A woman, sure enough!" she exclaimed. "It must be the person who sent Monte Merle home the other night with a knife under his shoulder. She'll meet with no mercy in this camp."

Floss had scarcely finished ere the woman whom she had just seen was helped upon the counter, and Captain Noll with a derisive laugh stepped back.

"Thar she stands, pards," cried the boss of the gold-camp. "Thar stands ther viper what stung Monte Merle. Isn't she a dandy chromo? Take 'er in from head ter foot, an' admire ther blushin'-daisy ov ther land ov gold. She came hyer fer blood. Only a few moments ago, my seraphs ov ther trigger, she had ther dead drop on yer humble servant, but ther tables

war suddenly turned an' I found myself on top!"

The crowd yelled and cheered at Captain Noll's remarks, and Floss at the crack saw Leo's eyes flash.

She did not quail before the camp wretches who had her completely in their power, but looked down upon them with fearless mien and undaunted spirit.

The sight was enough to stir the young spectator's blood, and it did send it boiling through her veins.

Leo the Trailer had apparently sealed her lips, for Captain Noll's insulting language did not call forth a single word.

"Let's crown her queen ov Pistol City. By Jove! she's a daisy!" yelled a voice from the crowd, and the suggestion made in sport was loudly taken up from all quarters.

"I'm afraid she'd rule us with ther trigger," said Oregon Noll. "From what I saw ov her work ter-night, I don't want her queen ov these diggin's."

"You are right!" suddenly flashed the woman on the counter. "Make me queen of this buzzard nest if you dare! I'll promise to vacate the throne when I have settled with a few of my subjects. One has been settled with. The sun, thank heaven! set on the grave of Monte Merle to-night!"

"Do yer hear thet, boys?" cried a six-foot ruffian whose face grew red with rage under Leo's words. "Thet's ther woman ye'r talkin' about makin' queen. I say down with her! By the gods! Monte Merle war my pard an' friend!"

"An' mine! An' mine!"

"Yes; he was the friend of men who could hang a boy with a prayer for mercy on his lips!" hissed Leo. "The man whose carcass you buried in your mountain graveyard more than deserved the fate he met. You call yourselves brave men. You stand below me with cocked revolvers in your belts and with bowies half-drawn from their sheaths. Brave as you are, hyenas of Pistol City, you dare not lend me a loaded revolver two minutes. No! you are cowards all. The snake that leaves his track on the mountain road has more courage than you men whose boasted bravery is an infamous lie!"

These words shot home, each one a shaft that penetrated to the quick.

"Oh, thunders! put an end to this farce!" was heard on every side. "Don't let her sex save ther person who laughs over Monte Merle's death."

The crowd surged forward toward the counter, and Captain Noll found himself being pushed at its head.

"Who's got a rope? By heaven! we'll crown this woman queen ov Pistol City, but with the hangman's cord!"

"Halt!" cried Oregon Noll, as he tried to keep the half-drunken and infuriated crowd back. "Wait till Silver Chick comes."

"Whar is he?"

"I don't know."

"Wait till he comes, eh? Not much, Oregon! This is our picnic, an' we wait for no more help. Down with the female viper!"

Oregon Noll saw that he could not stem the crowd that was determined to have Leo's blood.

"Ef you won't wait till Silver Chick comes, wait till I kin go home. I'll be back within five minutes."

"We'll wait that long, an' not a durned second longer!" was the reply. "Take out yer watch, Hank, an' count ther time. Five minutes it is. Now skip, captain, an' don't play us false."

Captain Noll drew back and bounded through the door into the moonlight.

"They don't know what I'm goin' arter," he said; "neither does thet girl. I'm goin' ter taunt her with the letter thet young gold-hunter wrote ter her just afore he died—ther letter I've kept all this time, an' warn't fool enough ter deliver!"

The speaker soon disappeared from the view of Floss, who stood at her place of observation, and the girl was permitted to turn again to the scene in the saloon.

"They'll hardly hold out their five minutes," she said, and then she saw Holy Hank look up from his watch and heard him say:

"Three!"

The word brought the wild-eyed, bloodthirsty crowd of gold roughs a foot nearer the counter on which the doomed woman stood.

Her life hung by a slender thread.

The men beneath her had no mercy in their eyes.

She had entered the lawless camp as an avenger, and they had caught her.

Her sex would prove no safeguard among the roughs of the gold hills.

She could look for nothing but death.

Floss looked over her shoulder and listened for Oregon Noll's footstep, looked for his figure.

His shanty was not far off, but not a sound indicated his return.

"Four!" suddenly said Holy Hank. "Thar's only one minute left, boys."

Floss started toward the door with an exclamation of horror on her tongue.

The tigers of Pistol City touched the counter;

they surrounded Leo the Trailing; she was looking down into the jaws of death!

Holy Hank's attention was riveted upon the dial of his gold chronometer.

He was counting the seconds that bounded the last minute of the allotted time.

"That's a long minute," growled the men. "Ye'r' crowdin' two inter one, ain't yer, Hank?"

"Five!" said the barkeeper solemnly.

Not a change came over the well-cut face of the lovely avenger.

"Did yer hear it, girl? Hank says 'Five,' an' Captain Noll hezn't got back!" said one of the men. "You b'long ter us now!"

"I will see about that! That woman shall have a chance for her life!"

These words, full of determination, fell from Floss's lips.

She stepped to the door as the last one was spoken, fire in her eye, a silver-mounted revolver in her hand.

The next second she had crossed the threshold of Holy Hank's place, and stood between the roughs and the door.

The instant she appeared Leo saw her, and the eyes of the two girls met.

"By Jupiter! thar's Floss!" exclaimed a dozen men.

"Yes, I am here!" was the retort. "I'll help you, Leo. Here! Catch this friend!"

The following moment the silver-mounted revolver flew from Floss's hands and spun through the air toward Leo.

Twenty hands went up to check its flight, but it avoided them all, and the female avenger caught it, with an ejaculation of mingled rage and joy.

"Choke ther helper! Throttle Floss, ther traitress!" rung through the room.

"Look at me, cowards of Pistol City!" said Leo, coolly, as she leaned forward, the lock of the new revolver clicking in her hand. "Turn on that girl at the door, and I'll drop six of you dead in your boots! I came here to kill!"

The men shrunk back.

"Open a way for me!" continued Leo. "Divide! or I'll shoot my way to the door."

Suddenly the pards of Pistol City made a lane for the avenger, and leaping from the counter, she darted toward the opening.

"I guess you won't hang me before Captain Noll comes back!" she cried, and the next moment she was gone!

CHAPTER XX.

RED ROY'S WORK.

THE maddest men ever seen among the gold-mountains of California filled Holy Hank's saloon when Leo backed out with her flashing eyes fixed upon them and her revolver pointed at their heads.

They dared not spring after her, though they were eager to clutch her throat, for they saw that her finger was at the trigger, and that she was eager to open her battery of death.

Just beyond the threshold of the den she joined Floss, into whose eyes she threw a look of thanks.

"You helped me just in time, girl," Leo said. "I will never forget your assistance. We are friends from this time."

"I am glad that I was able to help you, but you are not out of danger. The men-tigers of Pistol City are only drawing breath for a gigantic leap."

"I know it. I can see that in their eyes," answered Leo. "If Captain Noll had remained with his pards, there would be a dead man in that den now. Where does the scoundrel stay?"

"He went toward his cabin."

Leo's eyes blazed anew.

"Show me the way to it," she said, in tones of command. "If it is in my power, I will end before daylight the trail of vengeance."

Floss did not stir, but looked up into the avenger's face.

"Very well," said Leo, with a smile. "If you will not show me Captain Noll I will find him, myself."

"I will show you; this way." And Pure-Gold Floss started off, closely followed by the woman who had just escaped from the mad crowd hardly twenty yards away.

For several minutes the two females traversed the camp, or until Floss halted before a cabin and turned to Leo with a look of discovery.

"Is this his home?" asked the avenger.

"Yes; but you must interview him in a short space of time. Don't you hear the men of Pistol City behind us?"

"The tigers are growling yet," was the answer as Leo stepped toward the door. "I will transact my business with Captain Noll in ten seconds."

The next moment she raised the wooden latch before her and pushed the door open.

"Here I am, Captain Noll," she said, springing into the cabin, whose interior was lighted by a tin lamp on a rough deal table. "I could not wait for your return. I—"

Leo paused abruptly and then an exclamation of "My God!" rung from her throat.

The cabin was tenanted but by a man who swung in the middle of the place with his feet two feet from the floor, and with the weird

light falling on the ghostly face of the boss of Pistol City.

"This is an interference which I will not brook—I care not who did it!" cried Leo.

Floss looked once at the terrible sight, and became rooted as it were to the spot.

"Your knife, girl!" said Leo as she mounted the table and leaned toward the hanged man.

In an instant she held a knife in her hand, and the next second the body of Captain Noll, of Pistol City, dropped with a thud to the floor.

"That is Cool Conrad's work," said Floss to herself. "He came back from the graveyard to find Noll and to hang him. It makes war between him and Leo from this time!"

The woman avenger sprang from the table and bent over the man she had cut down.

Her eyes flashed then as they had never flashed before.

"He is warm," she said looking up into Floss's face. "We came in the nick of time. I will yet strike this man for his crime in the canyon!"

Before she could further examine Oregon Noll, Leo felt her hand grasped by the girl who had leaped to her side.

"The pards of Pistol City are not twenty yards from the hut. They are hunting this very man. What if they should find you here? You must get away from here."

"And leave this man?"

"Yes."

"I cannot until—"

Leo paused and looked at the knife that glittered in her hand.

Then, all at once she stooped over Captain Noll again.

"Why wreak your revenge on one already dead?" said Floss, still holding Leo's wrist.

"Let them find him hanged only. Come! there is a retreat from this cabin which I believe those fellows out there know nothing of. I have been Captain Noll's *protegee* for years. I share some of his secrets. They will leap into this shanty within a minute. Come!"

Floss's fingers tightened on Leo's wrist as she almost dragged her toward a darkened corner of the cabin, where she stooped and lifted one of the boards that formed the floor.

The girl's action disclosed a dark opening like the mouth of a pit, and she pointed into it as she looked into astonished Leo's face.

"It leads to safety and, to you, to future vengeance," said Floss. "Down into it. I will follow—quick!"

Leo threw a glance at the human body lying on the floor in the lamplight, and then lowered herself into the opening.

Floss was not long in following her, and she replaced the board, working from below.

"They do not know of this place, you say?" said Leo, her lips at the girl's ear and speaking in a whisper.

"I think not."

"Then let us remain here and hear the pards when they find Captain Noll."

"No," was the quick response. "We must take no risks. We are in an underground passage which leads to safety if we pursue it at once. Let the men of Pistol City discover their choked captain. We must not stay here."

It was true, as Floss had just said, that the two girls found themselves in a narrow and low-ceiled corridor, which was as dark as pitch itself.

The *protegee* of the gold camp took Leo's hand and started down the passageway, and not a word was spoken until a halt was made apparently some distance from Captain Noll's cabin.

Amid darkness and profound silence, the two friends stood side by side, Leo wondering why her beautiful guide did not resume the journey.

"We stop here," whispered Floss. "The coast seems clear." And she began to work mysteriously, with her hands above her head.

In a short time the two friends clambered from the subterranean corridor into an apartment that possessed a board floor like Captain Noll's cabin, but darkness still enveloped them.

"You are in Silver Chick's cabin," whispered Floss at Leo's ear.

The avenger started and almost let a cry escape her.

"In the home of that other desperado?" she exclaimed. "Silver Chick is Captain Noll's right bower. Where is he?"

"He has apparently left camp for some purpose," was the reply.

"Do you think he has deserted?"

"Impossible! He would not desert his pard."

"And I am in his cabin!" said Leo. "Would to Heaven I could find him!"

The twain had reached the end of the underground passage which lay between the cabins of the mountain pards, and now they stood in Silver Chick's cabin ready for the next thrilling adventure in store for them.

Floss hunted around until she found a lamp which she lit with a lucifer, but shaded the flame with her hand.

Silver Chick was not at home, and the appointments of the place were not unlike those peculiar to the cabins of the gold camps.

"What next?" asked Leo turning suddenly upon her companion.

The camp waif smiled.

"I consider this cabin only a stopping-place on the way to safety," was the answer. "Hark! I hear the pards of Pistol City."

She stepped to the door which she pulled ajar and listened intently.

"They have found Captain Noll," she sent over her shoulder in low tones to Leo who had stepped to her side. "Hear them! They are swearing revenge on all mankind except themselves. They've turned Pistol City into pandemonium. Listen!"

A smile passed over Leo's face as she listened to the voice which in clarion tones was penetrating every quarter of the camp.

"We swar by our lives ter wage war ter ther hilt ag'in' ther band thet choked Captain Noll! Ag'in' ther Dakota Tiger, ther girl from ther north—ag'in' Red Roy—an' all! Mercy shall hev no claim in this region! We shall spare not. Woe to ther enemies ov Pistol City, an' its tiger pards! Hurrah for blood!"

The two girls listening at the door of Silver Chick's cabin, heard these words as distinctly as if the speaker were not ten feet away.

They heard also the quick reply:

"We stand together in this, pard! We've turned from gold ter blood and vengeance; up with yer hats, boys! toss 'em toward ther stars an' cl'ar yer throats with a cry fer blood!"

"That suits me. I know where to find the men of Pistol City," said Leo. "I am willing for the fight to go on. The time will come—"

"Wait till ther captain gits on his feet ag'in!" came the interruption. "It war a close shave because ther hangman didn't understand his bizness."

"Heavens! Captain Noll is alive!" ejaculated Floss.

"Good!" was Leo's quick reply.

"You may like it, but I do not," said the camp waif. "It adds the most ferocious tiger of this region to those who have whetted their teeth for vengeance. I am sorry that the person who hanged Captain Noll did not succeed. But let us get away from here. Pistol City cannot harbor us now."

"Do you mean that it will be searched?"

"I do. Silver Chick is liable to reappear at any moment. We are on dangerous ground."

"Where is safer soil?"

"Where I will lead you if you will follow me."

"I will do that—for the present," said Leo. "Do not think that the threat and the oath of vengeance just heard have frightened me. I have nothing to turn me back—everything to urge me forward! I shot to-night a man whom I had sworn to torture—Doctor Pablo."

"Did you kill him?"

"I fear so, though I hope not. I would give my life almost, if the Mexican snake were still able to crawl. I am ready to follow you again, girl. When I came to Pistol City I asked for no friends, but I shall not reject the one Heaven has sent me."

The cabin door now opened further, and the two girls glided out into the starlight.

At that particular moment the camp seemed quiet and they made their way toward the mountain which rose above it, dark, wooded and threatening.

"Halt!" suddenly whispered Floss at Leo's side. "Look! yonder stands a man."

The girl avenger wheeled half-way around and in an instant saw the object singled out by her companion's keen eyes.

"Wal, ye've both got tergether, hev ye?" asked the man as he stepped forward.

"Red Roy!" ejaculated Floss.

"Thet's who I am, girl. I reckon I've got the camp riled by this time. Captain Noll never dreamed thet he'd be hung by ther man he low-ered inter Satan's Hotel."

Leo started toward him with a cry. "Did you do it, Red Roy?" she flashed.

"Bet yer eyes!" was the answer.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLOOD TRAIL.

NIGHT again among the gold hills of the Merced country, and a group of men between two rough-looking cabins of a certain mining "city" with which the reader is familiar were wondering what had become of a man whom they called Silver Chick.

"Mebbe," said one, "he's gone back ter 'Frisco."

"Hades, no! what 'd take ther Chick back thar now?" exclaimed a big, dark-faced man who wore a cloth of some kind around his neck.

"Isn't Monte Merle dead, cap'n?"

"Yes."

"An' isn't ther Chick his brother?"

"Ov course."

"Then, what Monte owned would fall ter him."

The man called captain started and a singular light beamed in his eyes.

It was Oregon Noll.

"Thar's suthin' in yer remarks, Dan," he said to the man who had just spoken. "But ther monte-bank would run on, even if Monte Merle warn't thar. Silver Chick wouldn't go ter 'Frisco without consultin' me."

"Then why doesn't he show up in Pistol City?"

"That's what I don't know," growled Captain Noll. "I know one thing, though. I'd give five years of my life ter hev my claws at Red Roy's throat five minutes! Curse me ef I wouldn't make thet g'loot see all ther stars ever born inter existence afore his feet slipped over ther brink ov death! I warn't lookin' for him last night; who war? I war about ter turn back ter Holy Hank's whar I left you with Leo in yer clutches when he pounced upon me like a tiger an' ther next thing I knew, I war gaspin' fer life among you. Red Roy hanged me didn't he? But do you think he cut me down?"

The group was silent for a minute.

"It's a kind o' puzzle, isn't it, captain?" said one, at length. "Mebbe Red Roy didn't intend thet you should die."

"Not arter I hung him down in Satan's Hotel?" cried Oregon Noll. "I don't b'lieve thet, boys. Red Roy intended thet I should be strangled ter death an' it wasn't his hand thet cut me down. Now, thar's another mystery. Whar did Doctor Pablo crawl ter?"

"Towards ther mountains ther blood trail goes," was the reply. "We didn't foller it. Let ther serpent go."

"I'm willin' ter do thet," laughed Oregon Noll. "I thought Leo gave him his everlastin'—she shot him at arm's length. Let him die somewhar among ther gold hills! Good-by, Doctor Pablo. We kin get along without you." And Captain Noll laughed again.

It was a wildly picturesque group that stood between the cabins and talked as we have just recorded.

Oregon Noll had escaped death by one of those miracles that seem to help the most desperate men in their hour of need.

It was probable that if Leo had not cut him down when she did, his life would have gone out at the end of Red Roy's rope; but, as it was, he had been choked into insensibility by the cord, and the efforts of his pards in restoring him to consciousness, had proved successful, so that Oregon Noll, the boss of Pistol City, was almost himself again.

The continued absence of Silver Chick not only puzzled, but irritated Captain Noll.

He went away shortly after Monte Merle's death, and had not mentioned his intentions to any one.

It was, to the men of the gold camp, unaccountably strange.

More than once during the day that followed Red Roy's unsuccessful stroke for vengeance Captain Noll thought of Silver Chick, and tried to account for his singular action.

Not all the camp knew that the Chick and Monte Merle were brothers, but they were, nevertheless.

The monte palace in 'Frisco was a valuable piece of property; it raked in thousands annually, and had a fame which had spread far beyond the Golden Gate.

Why did not Captain Noll think that Silver Chick had gone to take possession of his brother's riches?

Simply because they had sworn to stand by each other through thick and thin, and to die together, if needs be, with their boots on, side by side.

Captain Noll had confidence in his right bower.

He could not think that gold had lured him back to 'Frisco; he would be the last man on earth to charge Silver Chick with treason.

As for Doctor Pablo, the Mexican, he did not care.

The trail of blood which led to the mountains told him that the Southern viper had dragged himself thither to die, he hoped, among their gloomy shadows.

Even while Captain Noll and his pards were discussing Silver Chick's absence, a man crept along a mountain trail like a wounded serpent.

"Crista! won't I never get there?" he hissed, madly. "Will Doctor Pablo never reach the cave he discovered on one of his trips to the mountains?"

It was the wounded Mexican, the infamous wretch who, as Santa Cruz, years before, had perpetrated one of the most diabolical deeds ever committed on the southwest border.

He had reached an elevation in the trail from which, had it been daylight, he might have looked down upon Pistol City.

With teeth set hard and eyes blazing unnaturally, he crept over the trail which wound through the wooded slopes, and offered to carry him up to the stars that sparkled overhead.

If there was a place for him to die in, he was anxious to find it; if a cave existed at that elevation, he was eager to reach it, there to curse his slayer and to nurse his wrath in secret.

"She thinks she has killed Doctor Pablo," he laughed to himself. "The girl who escaped when Santa Cruz struck the rich ranchman thinks that her revolver has avenged all. *Sacrista!* let her beware of the rattlesnake she has only scotched! The balm of life is in the secret cave; it will make the Mexican strong, and he will sting his enemies to death!"

The minutes flitted by over his head, and the winds of the high trails fanned his cheeks, but he crept resolutely on, traversing the ground foot by foot, biting his lips every now and then,

and dropping on the rocks over which he crawled small particles of his life-blood.

He halted at last with an exclamation of joy.

The trail seemed to have come to an end, but close inspection would have showed that it turned aside from the mountain wall and wandered on.

But Doctor Pablo did not follow it.

He crept up to the wall and saw—what?

A dark place under a large bowlder met his eyes; it looked like the opening to a cavern.

Before he drew his body under the stone, he looked and listened fully five minutes.

Not a sound broke the stillness to disturb his intentions, and his eyes, always on the alert for enemies, saw no one.

He went forward again, but down a dark corridor from which nobody could see the glittering stars.

The Mexican serpent had reached his destination at last.

"I am here!" he exclaimed, a few minutes later. "Doctor Pablo has reached the home he shares with no one. *Carajo!* he is safe here, and from it he will go forth to strike the enemies who want his blood!"

A match first, and then a lamp found in the darkness illumined the elevated cavern, and Doctor Pablo, the wounded snake, threw himself on a blanket and looked at the wound in the breast.

His teeth cracked and his eyes grew wild as he separated his bloody clothing from his skin and then glared at the track of Leo's ball.

He washed the wound with water found in an earthen pitcher, and then applied some astringents which one corner of the cavern yielded.

After all this, he finished with adhesive bandages, and then laughed over his success.

"Doctor Pablo is far from dead yet," he cried. "The strength of the lion will come back to him here, and he will unite with it the cunning of the mountain cat!"

There was something ferocious about the man who had dragged himself for leagues over a rough mountain trail to that place.

He sat in the flicker of the lamp that threw his shadow on the wall behind him, and glared with blood-shot eyes toward the entrance as he spoke.

He did not see the pair of eyes that regarded him at that very moment, nor did his ears, keen as they were, hear the step that carried their owner toward him.

"Well, doctor, you have come home again, I see."

At these words Doctor Pablo uttered a cry of astonishment and turned around, while his hand wandered toward the couch at his left.

"You here?" he said to the speaker. "In the Virgin's name, how did you find this place?"

"Accidentally, doctor," was the laughing response. "Where have you been since last night?"

"Nearly dead among the bushes along the trail."

"Oho! then you are shot?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

The Mexican ground his teeth before he replied.

"An enemy, I see, doctor," continued the questioner.

"Yes; the meanest one I ever had."

"Silver Chick?"

"No; the girl who came from 'Frisco for blood! She shot me, Marmoset, but, as you see, Doctor Pablo still lives!"

The boy of the gold camp came forward until he stood before the Mexican.

"I don't know but that you deserve death at her hands," he said, looking him in the face.

"She would not slay without cause."

"What do you know?" exclaimed the doctor.

"A good deal. Doctor, I've been your patient, but I will inform you here that I poured on the ground the contents of nearly all your bottles. That is why I am here."

The wounded man made a move as if he would like to have sprung at Marmoset.

"Never mind. I will keep out of your clutches," he said. "I was not in this cave ten minutes before I knew it was one of your retreats. I expect a friend here presently."

"Who?"

"Men call him Red Roy."

Doctor Pablo started.

"I know you don't like him," Marmoset went on, "and he doesn't fancy you, doctor. He may not come alone when he does come, but a person named Leo may be with him."

"*Sacrista!*" burst from Doctor Pablo's lips before he could keep it back.

Marmoset smiled.

"You don't want to see her, then?" he said.

"I am ready! The hands of the Mexican are ready for her throat."

"Just as if we'll let you reach it. Aha, doctor! there is no safety for the men Leo the Trailer hates. Hark!"

Both Marmoset and the yellow viper turned toward the opening of the cave and listened.

The boy held a revolver in his hand and kept his finger at the trigger.

Both had undoubtedly heard a noise which indicated the near presence of some one.

Who was it?

All at once Marmoset started toward the entrance.

"I'll unearth the intruder," he said. "We'll see, doctor, who has come to the mountain cave."

He had taken three strides forward when all at once a growl rent the air, and he saw the glaring eyeballs and the figure of an enormous panther!

Quick as a flash Marmoset raised his revolver and fired, and with a yell almost human in its intonation, a huge body shot past him in the smoke, brushing his cheek with a tail.

A second later there arose a terrible cry from Doctor Pablo's lips, and the lamp being overturned by the maddened beast, left the cave in darkness!

"*Dios! Dios!* Help, senior, help!" rung through the cavern, but Marmoset could not see a thing.

He knew that the Mexican desperado was battling for life in the clutches of a panther, but he could offer no assistance, for he knew not where to begin.

Therefore, with a bowie clutched firmly in his right hand, Marmoset stood amid the gloom, expecting at any moment an attack from the terrible animal when he should have finished Doctor Pablo.

It was a strange and thrilling situation.

CHAPTER XXII.

A MESSENGER TO 'FRISCO.

WHILE the events just described were taking place in the cavern among the mountains, scenes of a different character, but equally as thrilling, were occupying time at another place.

The night was pretty well advanced, and there were two lingerers at Holy Hank's bar.

One of these fellows was Captain Noll, and the other a pard, his equal in size.

Holy Hank himself stood behind the counter contemplating the two men who had just drained their glasses, and who were talking in low but earnest tones, with their heads close together.

"Shall I go, captain?" asked Oregon Noll's pard. "Say ther word, an' I saddle ther hoss fer a ride ter 'Frisco."

Captain Noll hesitated.

"I don't like ter b'lieve thet ov Silver Chick," he said, in slowly spoken accents. "But I would give all I'm worth ter know whar he is ter-night."

"Then I ride ter 'Frisco, eh?"

Before Oregon Noll spoke again he consulted his watch.

"You kin go, Jerry," he said, glancing up at his companion. "You know what ter do. Ef ther Chick is in 'Frisco you'll find him at Monte's old palace. Don't tell him that I've sent you—don't let him suspicion that you ar' my spy."

"I'll fix that, captain."

"Play it fine, Jerry. Gods! Silver Chick must not know that I, Oregon Noll, suspect him. I can't—I don't want ter—b'lieve thet he's gone back on me arter ther oath we once took ter stand tergether; but why does he stay from Pistol City. Ef he is in 'Frisco, he's deserted me in an hour ov need. Go, Jerry; but carry with you my partin' command: 'Play it fine.'"

Jaguar Jerry reached for the bottle which stood on the counter, and helped himself to a big drink.

"Off it is for 'Frisco, captain," he said.

"You kin bet yer life thet I'll play it fine."

The two late customers walked together toward the door and passed out.

In the starlight that flooded the ground outside, Captain Noll held out his hand, and took his companion's bronze fingers in his grip.

The next moment the two men had separated, and while Oregon Noll walked toward his own shanty, Jaguar Jerry moved away in a contrary direction.

"Ef Silver Chick's gone back on me I want ter know it," growled the boss of the gold camp. "Ef Jerry finds him in 'Frisco, by heavens! I'll go thar myself an' scatter his brains over the faro-tables! I will submit to no treason. Ov course, he's Monte Merle's brother, an' heir to his wealth; but he's also bound to me by an oath which I will enforce with the trigger. Things hev gone awry hyer lately. Ther unexpected has happened in Pistol City. Ther brother ov ther young gold galoot we pulled up in ther Colorado canyon years ago has come fer vengeance. Cool Conrad, eh? Give me a chance on him an' it'll be Dead Conrad! Then a blood-huntress called Leo, whoever she is, is hyer on a red mission, an' Red Roy is avengin' his visit ter Satan's Hotel. An' Marmoset has slid from camp, an' Floss is gone! Great Cæsar! what's ter happen next? I don't keer what!" and the teeth of the speaker fairly cracked behind the last words of defiance.

"In the starlight stands Oregon Noll, the man with iron nerves an' a heart ov steel!" he went on suddenly. "Hanged, deserted, an' hunted, he is still unconquered, an' in his boots is ready ter fight it through! Let 'em come, singly or in pairs! We stay hyer till ther game has been played ter ther end!"

There was more than a flash of defiance in the

dark eyes of the camp terror, and he strode on proudly and with victory in his step.

At that moment Jaguar Jerry was saddling a horse not far away—saddling him for a ride to 'Frisco, leagues and leagues over mountains and valleys.

When the steed was ready, the bronze pard looked at his revolvers and flung himself into the saddle.

"Won't I play it fine when I git thar?" he chuckled. "I'll carry out ther captain's instructions to ther letter. Ef Silver Chick kin be found I'll find him! Ah! who thought thet gold'd lure him from Pistol City?"

Jaguar Jerry looked back on the dark cabins of the mining-camp as he rode slowly away.

The only ray of light that indicated that any part of the camp was inhabited came from a quarter where Holy Hank's place stood.

The messenger to 'Frisco urged his horse into a smart gallop as the suburbs of Pistol City fell at his back, and ere long he was riding fairly on the trail which after many windings entered the great city of the Golden State.

It was a long ride, but no man was better fitted by nature and training to make a success of it than Jaguar Jerry.

The road was well defined, for at lengthy intervals a stage rattled over it, eastward and westward bound, and the stars on this occasion showed Captain Noll's man the way he had been commanded to take.

Jaguar Jerry made his first five miles without an incident of any kind.

He had to multiply it many times before he could begin the hunt expected of him in 'Frisco.

Suddenly and without a second's warning a human hand seemed to leap from the mountain wall itself, and the next instant Jaguar Jerry's horse stood still.

"One word and you'll lose your brains!" hit him squarely in the teeth with stern emphasis. "You had better have stayed in camp."

The eyes of the gold-camp rough saw the man who leaned forward from a saddle and noticed, too, the pistol-barrel that grinned in his face while the star-beams danced along its polished surface.

"Great God, sir! who ar' you?" cried the tough.

"A man you didn't expect to meet twixt hyer an' 'Frisco!" was the response.

"You're not Cool Conrad?"

"Why not?"

"Then, I'm stumped!"

"Stumped you are! What's your name?"

"Jaguar Jerry."

"One ov the original eight pards ov Colorado?"

Jerry hesitated.

"Out with it!" continued the hunter. "The finger ov Albert's brother is at the trigger. The truth, Jerry! You ar' one ov the eight pards?"

"I am!" snapped the messenger to 'Frisco.

"All right! then I'll settle with another," said Cool Conrad.

"You intend ter kill me, then?"

"Why should I spare? Do you think I'm hyer ter hunt you mountain buzzards down one at a time to spare you? You're no fool, Jaguar Jerry. You've lived long enough ter know thet one man doesn't hunt another in Californy for sport."

Well did Jaguar Jerry know this.

He had followed the fortunes of Oregon Noll and Silver Chick long enough to know that the truth was in every word of Cool Conrad's last sentence.

"Yes," he said, "I know that."

"An' yet you think I don't intend ter kill you?"

There was a cool and bitter laugh at the end of the question, and Jaguar Jerry saw the detective's eyes shine madly behind it.

"You ar' faced toward 'Frisco?" continued Cool Conrad.

"Yes."

"Goin' thar by orders?"

"Praps."

"By Captain Noll's orders?"

"Yes."

"What takes you thither?"

"Work fer ther captain, ov course."

"An' you warn't cautioned ter look out for Cool Conrad?"

"No. We thought—"

"You thought what, Jerry?"

"We thought you war behind Pistol City."

A twinkle came into the Dakota Detective's eyes.

"I'm liable to be in unexpected places till this game's played through," he said quietly while he looked into Jaguar Jerry's face. "Ov course, Jerry, in ther natural course ov events, you expected ter die with yer boots on?"

This question seemed to stagger Oregon Noll's pard.

"Answer me!" said the detective sternly.

"Thet's ther way most men die in this ken-try," the pard of Pistol City replied.

"An' that's the way you ar' goin' out ov ther world. You don't want me ter spoil yer face, eh, Jaguar Jerry?"

The big tough ground his teeth, but the action did not change a muscle of Cool Conrad's face.

"See hyer! Ef I hunted a man, I think I'd give him a show," the gold tough said sullenly.

"You would, eh?"

"I would, by heavens!"

"I see by yer eyes thet ye'r ther most liberal man in these diggin's," said Conrad. "You mean thet ef you had half a chance you'd leave Conrad to ther buzzards of ther gold range. I've met men ov yer stamp afore. Yes, you'd give a foe a chance! You never gave ther boy gold-hunter one."

The last arrow went swiftly home.

"Thet war Captain Noll's work," cried Jerry.

"An' you hed no hand in it?"

"I war thar, ov course; what's ther use ov denyin' thet? I had ter be thar, but I—"

"You protested ag'in' ther deed, didn't yer?"

"Not thet; no. I—"

Jaguar Jerry paused like a man in whose throat a falsehood has suddenly stuck.

"What did you do? Out with it!" shouted Cool Conrad.

"I didn't want ter see ther youngster pulled up without a show."

"Oh, you didn't!"

"Thet's a fact, Cool Conrad!"

"Then, why didn't you protest? No lies, murderer of my brother. I know that not a voice war lifted against the commission of the black deed. I have discovered that. I know that you nor no other gold tough raised a hand against my brother's death. An' yet you say you didn't want ter see him die?"

The gold-camp ruffian was dumfounded.

"Then I'm ter hev no show?" he grated.

"Not a chance for yer life!" was the merciless hiss. "If you don't want yer face spoiled, I'll shoot you through the heart. By my life! I wish I could hang you, Jaguar Jerry, as they call you. I'd like ter give ther mountain vultures a glimpse ov you swingin' in mid-air as once swung the boy gold-seeker ov Colorado. Hands up!"

As the two hands of the mountain tough went upward at Cool Conrad's command he drove the spurs into his steed's flanks, and the next second the two horses collided with a crash.

Cool Conrad's horse was forced back almost on his haunches, and to the side of the trail, and a wild cry of triumph pealed from Jaguar Jerry's throat as his hand whipped out a revolver.

"Who's goin' ter be shot through ther heart, eh?" cried the gold-camp rough in the exuberance of his fierce joy. "I'll git ter 'Frisco yet, Cool Conrad! You don't know Jaguar Jerry as you should!"

At this mad moment the avenger-detective was not idle.

His horse had fallen with him against the trail wall and he seemed on the eve of being badly crushed.

"All right!" he cried. "The first shot kills, my mountain hyena!"

Simultaneously with his last word two revolvers awoke the nocturnal echoes of the pass.

The man under the struggling horse leaped suddenly to his feet, but the rough in the saddle reeled back and struck the ground with a thud!

"It was a game two can play at," said Cool Conrad standing erect in the trail. "I informed the pards ov Pistol City that Monte Merle's end was but the beginnin'. They laughed at my message, but the mornin' shall prove that it was no idle threat. That war a happy thought ov yers, Jaguar Jerry—you played a bold game for life; but it wouldn't work!"

The eyes of Cool Conrad were full of victory as he stood over the dark-mustached and handsome desperado who had died with his boots on in a bold fight for life.

The stars went down the azure paths of the midnight sky.

Morning came again and revealed the beauties the darkness had hidden.

When Oregon Noll opened the door of his cabin he saw before it an object which made him recoil.

It was a human hand and between the stiffened fingers was a piece of paper.

With burning curiosity he stooped and took it from the cold grip to read:

"This is the hand of the man who will never see 'Frisco!"

COOL CONRAD."

Captain Noll dropped the paper with a cry.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STILL ON THE TRAIL.

ALL day that ghastly hand lay wrapped in a piece of paper on a certain shelf in Oregon Noll's cabin.

"That devil means business ov ther reddest kind," declared Noll to himself. "Why doesn't he try his hand on me? By heavens! he dare not; that's why!"

If this thought consoled the boss of Pistol City he was welcome to the consolation.

He did not want any one to know that he had sent Jaguar Jerry toward 'Frisco on the important business of finding out Silver Chick's intentions, therefore he had concealed the bloody hand and set out to find the body which he believed lay somewhere on the trail.

Captain Noll's mission met with success, for

where Jaguar Jerry met his fate he was found, his white face turned skyward and his one hand clutching the scanty grass of the trail.

We leave the reader to imagine the oath Oregon Noll took over the body of his pard and late companion.

He buried it himself among the mountains, and came back to Pistol City without exciting suspicion of any kind.

"I'll wait till ther game hyer is played through an' then I'll go ter 'Frisco myself," he said. "It'll give ther Chick time ter show up, an' ef he doesn't I'll know whar ter look for him."

And so the day passed and the night came again.

As usual a crowd, the same old set, gathered at Holy Hank's, but this time some of its members were missing.

If they had been searched for they might have been found standing guard at the roads or trails that led into the camp, each one a human statue with eager eyes, and with fingers at the ready trigger.

Oregon Noll had taken precautions against another surprise.

"Hang me, ef ther blood-hunters shall sneak inter Pistol City any more without warnin'," he said. "I've given ther boys ther orders, an' they know jest what ter do. War ter ther knife an' ther knife to ther hilt! thet's ther doctrine. We'll assume ther offensive afore long; then let ther killin' galoots look out!"

It was while a number of men stood along Holy Hank's counter, discussing the thrilling events of the past few days, that a miner came in and placed before them the roughly-fashioned head-board of a grave.

"What's thet?" exclaimed a dozen voices at once.

"Ther head-board ov Monte Merle's grave. See what somebody hez chalked on it!"

The roughs of Pistol City crowded forward.

"Read it out, Ruby Rob," cried several on the outside. "Give us ther lingo ov ther head-board."

The man who had brought the object to the saloon picked it up and read, to the astonishment of all:

"MONTE MERLE.

KILLED BY ALBERT'S BROTHER.

LIFE FOR LIFE!

VENGEANCE BELONGS TO COOL CONRAD."

A moment of profound silence followed the reading, and then the air resounded with the most furious oaths.

"Thar's a bad lot ov us left!" was the cry. "Let this man come like a man, not like a coward ter strike a feller in ther back. He is only brave when he sneaks about writin' lies like thet over ther graves ov his betters. Let him come now! Whar is ther boss liar from Colorado?"

The next moment there strode into the saloon a man who had every eye riveted upon him at once.

He came forward with steady step, and glanced at the men who stood along the counter.

He was neatly dressed in garments that looked more at home among the high gambling-dens of 'Frisco than among the roughs of Pistol City.

His hair was black and long, and he had a luxuriant mustache which was carefully waxed at the ends, and a goatee served in the same manner.

The broad-brimmed, soft sombrero, which sat rather jauntily on his head, added materially to his dandified appearance, and he was, on the whole, just the kind of man, coming when he did, to excite the pards of Pistol City.

"Will the gents of Pistol City tip glasses with Sombrero Sam, just in from the mountains?" he asked. "I'm riding on a wager, an' I stop hyer fer breath."

The pards of the gold camp exchanged glances with one another, and one of them, who stood in the rear rank, touched his companion's arm and whispered:

"Go an' tell Captain Noll; do it secretly an' quick! How the deuce did this man pass the guards?"

Holy Hank did not glance at the men to get their response to the invitation to take something.

He knew that it was accepted beforehand, and accordingly began to set out the glasses.

"I've wagered a cool thousand thet I kin ride from 'Frisco ter Flat Broke within a given time," continued the stranger. "I'm now three hours ahead ov time, an' kin spend thet hyer. What's ther distance from hyer ter Flat Broke?"

"Eighty miles."

"Good! Thet's ten less than I hed calculated on. Pour out yer liquor, gents! Whar's Silver Chick? This is his stampin'-ground, isn't it?"

"He's a citizen of Pistol City, but he's not hyer just now," was the answer.

"Gone off, eh?"

"For a spell."

"I would like ter see 'im. Knew him years ago in 'Frisco."

"Do you know Captain Noll?" asked Holy Hank.

"No."

"He's our boss g'loot, an' he's a daisy, stranger!"

Sombrero Sam opened his eyes wide at the bartender's words.

"Whar is he?" he asked.

"At his shanty. Shall we call 'im?"

"We'll drink first. Hyer's ter Sombrero Sam's ride ter Flat Broke! May he win it an' rake the thousand in!"

The toast was drank with a gusto that told how fond the Pistol City pards were of Holy Hank's vile stuff, and the glasses fell back upon the counter with a musical ring.

They all looked into the dark face and coal-black eyes of Sombrero Sam, but read no deception there.

"Had a fine time ther first sixty miles," smiled the stranger, as he leaned against the counter and set his elbows upon it. "Ther boys tried ter play road-agent twice, an' once they got a lasso over my head, but it didn't stay—not much! I warn't goin' ter be stopped thet way. Thar warn't nothin' in ther bet ag'in' tryin' ter waylay me, an' I hed ter look out. I guess I'm out ov ther clutches now, seein' thet I've not been molested since noon. Nice kentry this; must be gold hyer."

"Some," was the laconic answer.

"Looked thet way to me when I came along. You don't keep a graveyard hyer, I s'pose?"

More than one man glanced at the head-board, which had dropped on the floor on Sombrero Sam's arrival.

"Yes, we keep a plantin' ground, but don't use it often," was the reply.

"Thought not, when I saw you gents. By George! would like ter hev seen Silver Chick! Think he won't come ef I stay my three hours hyer?"

"I ruther think not. He's liable ter stay away for days. He went off—Hello! thar's Captain Noll."

Sombrero Sam turned slowly upon the man who at that moment entered the door of the saloon.

In an instant the eyes of the two met.

"Captain Noll, eh?" said the new-comer, advancing toward the boss of the gold camp. "You don't know me, I guess; but hyer's the hand ov Sombrero Sam ridin' ter Flat Broke on a bet."

Oregon Noll scrutinized the handsome speaker from head to foot before he spoke or extended his hand.

"I don't know you, but if you're on a peace mission, I welcome you ter Pistol City," he said.

In the middle of the floor the hands of the two men met, watched by the crowd, who knew that a drink would follow the introduction.

"What's ther matter thet you've guarded yer camp?" asked Sombrero Sam. "When I warn't thinkin' ov sech a thing I rode ag'in' a guard an' got halted."

"We've had a time hyer ov late."

"Injuns?"

"No, white people."

"A fight for a claim, eh?"

"Not exactly. A tussle for blood."

Captain Noll's eyes sparkled madly behind the last sentence.

"I'll give you a part ov ther layout, but not hyer," he went on. "How long do you stop with us?"

"Three hours."

"That's good, an' we're glad ter see you in Pistol City, Sombrero Sam. You'll not refuse ter drink with Oregon Noll?"

"I never go back on a mountain gentleman. Seems ter me, since I've met you, that I've seen you in 'Frisco."

"Quite likely. I've been thar," assented Noll.

"An' I'm fresh from ther city ov faro banks an' boss times," was the retort. "Drink with you Oregon Noll? with all my heart, sir, an' then you'll tip glasses with me?"

We will not describe the scene that followed; the two men drank together over Holy Hank's counter, and then the whole crowd was summoned to drink again with Sombrero Sam.

"I invite you ter spend part ov yer time hyer with me," said Oregon Noll to the man just in. "I've got a story ter tell an' suthin' ter exhibit."

Sombrero Sam took from his pocket a gold piece which he tossed upon the counter with the words "for the boys" as he caught Holy Hank's eye.

Then, turning upon Captain Noll, he took his arm and the two men started off.

A wild cheer from twenty throats approved of the new comer's liberality, and this was followed by a tremendous tiger for Sombrero Sam himself.

Just outside the den stood a horse whose flanks still bore evidences of a long ride over none of the best of trails, and Sam took hold of the rein as he walked on at Oregon Noll's side.

But few words were spoken by the two men until they found themselves seated in Noll's cabin, a rough deal table and a lamp between them.

It was a strange picture in the gleam of the lamp, and in the midst of the weird surroundings.

The two men, while they were well built fellows physically, were quite unlike in features.

The startling events of the last few days had

left traces even on that hard bronzed face of Captain Noll.

His eyes had lost much of their old expression which, at times was soft, and in them now gleamed the look of a man who is hunted from pillar to post by the beagles of vengeance.

"Hyer's whar I hold forth when I'm at home," said Captain Noll, glancing around the room. "It's no palace, as you see, sir, but it's home, all ther same. Still," and here the speaker smiled, "still, I'm fightin' ter keep it."

"I don't see why you should."

"Ov course you don't. I said I'd give you ther lay-out an' I will."

"And you'll find in Sombrero Sam a listener thet'll do yer story justice."

Sombrero Sam looked into Oregon Noll's face and rested an arm on the table which was a signal for the Pistol City tough to begin.

"I ought ter go back several years ter ther hangin' ov a young kid somewhar in Colorado—a hangin' thet is put on my shoulders, but you'll understand it all as I go along," began Noll. "Wal, thet boy hed a brother who has turned up an' wants my blood an' ther blood ov every chap what saw ther kid pass in his checks. The blood-hunter has already struck. You know Monte Merle?"

"I should say I did."

"Wal, he's buried in our graveyard—killed by thet man! He comes like a wolf in the night an' strikes. But thet isn't all. We're hunted by a woman, too—a durned pretty creature who calls herself Leo, an' who wants ther same lives sought by Cool Conrad. I've said thet he killed Monte Merle; thet war several nights ago. Now I'll show yer what he did last night."

Captain Noll left his stool and took from a shelf above his head something wrapped in paper that had a dark-reddish stain.

"Thar! I found that at my door at daylight," he went on displaying to Sombrero Sam's gaze a human hand. "Thet hand saved my life once. It b'longed ter Jaguar Jerry, an' now I throw it on my table while he sleeps under two feet of mountain ground. It's ther work ov a man who is afraid ter walk up like a bravo an' strike. I would like ter toss Jerry's hand inter his teeth, an' then foller it up with my bowie. Do I look like a hunted man, Sam? I never expected to be dogged from lair ter lair by thet gold kid's kin, Cool Conrad! Ef I hed known thet Albert hed a brother I'd hev hunted him down years ago. You don't know it all; you don't know thet I've lost Pure-Gold Floss on account ov it all—thet we hev a man hyer called Red Roy who gave a well-kept secret away—thet a boy called Marmoset is mixed up in ther matter. You may ride on ter Flat Broke, but I'll stay hyer an' fight it out. When you stop hyer ag'in, on yer way back ter 'Frisco, we'll be at ther end ov ther game."

As Oregon Noll ceased, his hand crept forward toward the ghastly memento of vengeance which still lay on the table.

"What ar' you goin' ter do with yer pard's hand?" asked Sombrero Sam.

"Throw it inter Cool Conrad's face when I meet him!" was the hissed reply.

"Would you do it now if he war ter come?"

"Wouldn't I? He dare not open my door an' enter hyer!"

"Ar' ye sure ov thet, Oregon?" And that moment Sombrero Sam's hand closed on the camp rough's wrist. "You needn't look far for Cool Conrad. He sits before you!"

The eyes of the two men met.

"You? What ar' yer givin' me?" laughed the desperado.

"The truth!" was the solemn reply. "I am Cool Conrad of Dakota! Whar ar' yer eyes, Oregon Noll? Couldn't you look under my disguise and see yer doom? Ha, ha!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

KNIFE AND KNIFE.

NEED we say that Captain Noll's eyes seemed to start from their sockets?

He sat on the stool like a murderer suddenly faced by the ghost of his victim, and stared across the table at the man of many disguises, Cool Conrad, of Dakota.

Sombrero Sam the dread hunter from the North?

He could not believe it, and yet he had just heard the announcement and confession from the lips of the man himself.

For several moments after Cool Conrad's last words the two men stared into each other's eyes. There was the cool glitter of finished madness in the depths of the detective's orbs, and astonishment in Captain Noll's.

Only a deal table stood between them, and the tin lamp lit up the tableau.

"Do you doubt me now?" suddenly asked Cool Conrad. "You don't think I would call myself Albert's brother in Pistol City for mere sport, do you? The hand that clutches yer wrist cut off Jaguar Jerry's, an' threw it at yer door last night. You ar' goin' with me to ther mountain, Oregon Noll."

The desperado of the gold camp started and drew back.

To the mountains with Cool Conrad?

Never!

He got upon his feet, but the detective rose also, still clutching his wrist.

"Not a word, not a cry! It is Cool Conrad's hour!" said the Dakota Detective sternly. "I have tracked the unthens to their last lair, an' I am goin' to deal with them—with you first, Oregon Noll. To the mountains!"

Captain Noll threw a glance at the human hand lying on the table.

"Let it lie thar," said Conrad, catching the look and pointing at the hand. "Thar may be another beside it afore daylight."

"We'll see about thet, tiger," growled Oregon Noll under his breath. "By Jupiter! when we git to ther mountain, I'll hev a say in ther final settlement ov our blood debt!"

Cool Conrad, or Sombrero Sam, had taken a step toward the cabin door, and the man he had hunted so long was at his side.

"Remember," said the detective in impressive tones. "Not a word over yer lips."

There was no reply, and the two men stepped into the starlight.

They could hear the boisterous voices of the dark-shirted revelers at Holy Hank's which was not far off, and the sounds caused Captain Noll to turn his head instinctively in that direction, but his action was caught and watched by the man at his side.

They went down a trail between the cabins together, and Noll knew that Cool Conrad was taking him toward the mountains whose forms in the daytime shadowed the camp.

As they neared the confines of Pistol City, the eyes of its chief desperado suddenly flashed with hope, for he thought of the guard he had established to keep back the very man into whose hands he had fallen.

Every road leading into camp had been picketed.

There was hope of rescue yet.

"Don't look fer yer guard, Noll," suddenly said Cool Conrad as if he read the thoughts passing through his prisoner's head. "I fixed the fellow on this road when I came inter camp."

Oregon Noll made no reply, and the place where he had stationed the guard was passed without a halt being made.

Cool Conrad had told the truth; the sentry had been "fixed."

On, on for a mile more, and all at once the Dakota Detective halted.

"How ar' ye armed?" he asked suddenly.

"Like yerself, I guess—bowie an' six-shooter."

"An' you want fair play, I reckon?"

"Yes; thet's ther custom hyer."

"Did you establish it?"

"No; it war ther custom afore I came."

A moment's silence followed.

"Which weapon kin you use best?" asked Cool Conrad.

"I'm pretty good with both," was the reply, while a faint smile appeared at the corners of Captain Noll's mouth.

"I'm considered thet way myself," said the detective. "Show yer bowie an' we'll measure blades."

Oregon Noll's wrist had been released, and he drew his bowie at the same time that Cool Conrad's blade caught the star-gleam.

With the coolness of ancient gladiators, the two enemies laid their bowies side by side and measured their shining blades.

There was no appreciable difference in length or width; the knives looked like twin weapons fashioned by the same hand and at one time.

"They're just alike," said Cool Conrad, glancing from the bowies into Captain Noll's face. "We'll try conclusions with them."

Oregon Noll stepped back a pace with his big knife clutched in his right hand, and with defiance leaping from his eyes.

"You've hunted me a long time an' now you've found me," he said to the detective. "You've trailed me from lair to lair, you say?"

"I've done thet very thing," was the answer.

"I didn't find yer trail at once, but I hunted till I struck it. If you had not left 'Frisco when you did, I would hev settled with you thar."

"An' ef you hedn't escaped from Monte Merle's man-trap, you wouldn't be hyer, eh, Conrad?" grinned the man from Pistol City.

"That is true, perhaps; but ther man-trap didn't hold me, an' hyer I am!"

"So I see."

"Then, get ready ter fight!" cried Cool Conrad. "I give you a chance which is more than I ever thought I'd do. Ef you win this bowie game, go back an' treat ther pards ov Pistol City; ef I win, I'll do it!"

"All right! they're sartain ter be treated any way it goes."

In the starlight trail of the mountain the right feet of the two men crept forward noiselessly and like serpents.

All at once up went the gleaming knives in their right hands.

"What's ter be ther signal?" asked Noll.

"Thar's ter be none. Let the best man win! The fight is on. Sail in, Captain Noll!"

But Oregon Noll did not move, although he looked daggers at his enemy and seemed about to aim a blow at his breast.

Face to face the twain stood for several minutes, each one watching the other and waiting for an offensive move of some kind.

"Pshaw!" suddenly laughed Cool Conrad. "Don't yer want ter fight, Oregon?"

"Don't you?"

"That's what I fetched yer hyer for!"

"Then why don't yer go in? It looks ez if ye don't want my blood ez badly ez ye let on."

That put an end to the truce.

All at once Cool Conrad threw himself forward, and he made a ferocious pass before the desperado's eyes.

Quick as a flash the left hand of Oregon Noll darted up, and at the detective's wrist, and caught it in mid-air, only to be shaken off before he could aim a blow with his knife.

This action threw the two men several feet apart, and gave each a breathing spell.

"Is this ter last all night?" exclaimed Captain Noll. "I thought yer wanted blood, Conrad!"

It was a taunt that made the detective's black eyes glitter.

"Blood it shall be!" he said. "Now, Captain Noll, we hunt hearts to ther death."

He came forward with the tiger in his nature unchained, but still cool.

The two men met in the middle of the trail, foot to foot, and knife to knife.

Their long hair lay on their shoulders, their hats had been cast at their feet, and with the mien of rival mountain lions, they gathered strength for the deadly onset.

Suddenly they came together again, this time by Captain Noll's action.

They met with strokes intended by each to be fatal and to settle the duel.

But as before, strange coincidence, their arms met in mid-air, but only for a moment.

With an oath, Captain Noll drew back half a pace and then leaped tigerishly at the breast of his opponent.

However well Cool Conrad had prepared for the mad rush, he could not stem it and throw his enemy off.

The two men closed as Oregon Noll's blade came down, driven by all the strength of his arm; they became entangled in one moment, and the next were struggling more like wrestlers than duelists in the trail.

For a minute the strange combat went on, and the deadly foes swayed back and forth, each one unable to use the knives they had drawn for a settlement of their hate.

They were equally matched, and each in power was a giant.

At the end of the minute, Oregon Noll seemed to wrench himself loose.

He broke away from Cool Conrad with an ejaculation of joy, and kept his equilibrium with the bowie still clutched in his hand.

The Dakota Detective stood in the middle of the trail with a challenge lighting up his eyes, but all at once he went backward.

"Whose game is it now, Cool Conrad?" suddenly laughed Oregon Noll. "You didn't expect ter be killed by ther g'loot ye caught ter-night!"

Even as the camp sport spoke, Cool Conrad struck the ground like a man cut to the death.

The victor looked at the spectacle, and then went forward.

"Albert's brother, eh?" he said. "I hev this ter say, Cool Conrad: you war a fool ter give Oregon Noll a show fer his life, but I thank yer fer doin' it, all ther same. Ah! I see now. Thet mustache changed yer appearance. It's off now, an' I see in you ther man what I saw in ther Coast City Hotel, in 'Frisco."

The gold-camp desperado stood over the form lying in the starlight.

The glossy mustache, which had aided Cool Conrad to play the role of Sombbrero Sam, had been torn from his lip during the tussle for life, and once more he looked like himself.

"Thar's no harm, I reckon, in seein' what he carries," continued Captain Noll, and the following moment his bronzed hands were rummaging through Cool Conrad's pockets.

He was disappointed, for he found nothing of value.

A little package of paper, which he expected to reveal something, contained only a lock of hair, which he threw down with his favorite curse.

It was the hair of the boy he had brutally hanged years before—a lock of Albert's hair!

"I shall treat ther pards ov Pistol City, not you, Conrad," said Noll, getting up on his feet again. "Now I hev ter fight Red Roy an' Leo. I'll get Floss back ag'in with no Marmoset ter bother me, an' she'll yet be queen ov a mountain kingdom, an' also Captain Noll's gal. Lie thar for ther buzzards, Conrad! In my opinion, ther kid we roped in ther Colorado canyon is yet un-avenged!"

He still held the victorious bowie in his hand when he walked back.

"Oh, I'm the bowie dandy ov Californy!" he went on. "A den ov rattlers is nothin' ter Noll ov Pistol City when they corner him. Ther hand I hold kin bluff in any game they set up on this chick. I'd like ter meet ther rest ov my foes. Whar ar' Red Roy an' ther female blood-hunter ov ther North?"

Nobody seemed near enough to molest the victor in the bowie duel.

He had picked up his sombrero, and all at once tossed it toward the stars with a cry of mad delight.

"I'm monarch ov this kentry, I am!" he exclaimed. "A hand beside Jaguar Jerry's before mornin'? I guess not! By Jupiter! I kin whip a cyclone!"

His back was on his enemy now, and he was walking toward Pistol City and its boisterous roughs.

He did not look behind him, consequently he did not see the slight figure that appeared suddenly where Cool Conrad lay.

It was the figure of a young girl, and she looked into the detective's face and listened at his heart.

"He is dead!" she said. "He has failed midway down the trail of vengeance. Marmoset must know this. The brother of Albert shall have a grave among the gold hills."

She started off with a last glance at the man lying in the trail and disappeared.

It was Floss, Captain Noll's *protegee*, and the girl he was going to make queen of a gold kingdom among the mountains.

Half an hour later an owl flying down the mountain pass saw a handsome man brace himself against a rock and throw his hands appealingly to the stars.

His hat was off and his black hair swept his shoulders in the wildest abandon.

"Dead? by no means!" he exclaimed. "Laugh over yer liquor at Holy Hank's, Captain Noll. My heart is still unpierced, my oath unfulfilled. I'll git thar yet!"

CHAPTER XXV.

FLOSS MAKES HER MARK.

"HEAVENS! he is gone! Look on the ground for a blood trail, Marmoset. He was here dead, as I thought, only a little while ago, and now—he is not to be seen!"

The speaker was Floss, and she had just come back to the spot where Cool Conrad and Oregon Noll had recently fought for the mastery.

She was not alone.

The companion who accompanied her was Marmoset of Pistol City.

The boy had a bandage about his left wrist as if it had been hurt in some manner, and his clothes were torn in several places.

It was night still, beautiful starlight, and Floss continued as she pointed at a certain spot in the trail:

"Here's where they fought like two grizzlies, and here is where I found the man from Dakota after it was all over."

"I can see that two men had a hard tussle here," said Marmoset, looking at the trampled ground at his feet. "If there is a blood trail it cannot be pursued by a light like this. We will have to wait for day."

"No, no!" cried the girl. "Conrad may not have been dead. It is possible that he came to, and wandered off—perhaps back to camp."

"Where they'll make short work of him," added Marmoset.

"To camp, then! He must have friends there. Cool Conrad is too brave to die without a friend within call!"

Marmoset looked toward Pistol City, but did not move.

"I can't forget the doctor and the fight he had with the panther," he said aloud, as if he had already dismissed Cool Conrad from his mind.

"He came to the cave shot by Leo, and, as I thought, weak and near death's door. When I saw him in the light of his lamp in the cavern, I wouldn't have given a dollar for Doctor Pablo's chances. In the midst of it all the wounded panther bounded into the place and leaped at him. He overturned the lamp, and he and the doctor had it rough-and-tumble in the darkness. I stood by, knife in hand, waiting for my turn, not knowing when it would come. Suddenly, Floss, the beast left Doctor Pablo with a roar of pain, for the Mexican had found his knife, and given him a thrust. Then I got the wound on my wrist, but I gave the mad animal a stroke that stretched him out dead. It was the fiercest panther I ever saw."

"And the doctor?" asked the interested girl.

"I left him in the cave pretty well scratched up, but with life in him yet. I wonder who wounded the panther?"

"We will know some time, perhaps. Now, let us turn our attention to Cool Conrad. You are not afraid to go to Pistol City?"

"Afraid?" and Marmoset smiled. "I have taken a deep interest in that man. I would help him along the trail of vengeance; but if he has received Captain Noll's bowie, I'm afraid he has reached the end of it before this."

"Time will tell. He fell here, but he is not here now. Vengeance would take him to the gold camp."

The two young people were moving toward Pistol City while Floss uttered the last words, and in a few moments had left the scene of the knife-duel a goodly distance in the rear.

They were not far behind Captain Noll, but that worthy had already reached the camp, and no doubt had told to a boisterous crowd at Holy

Hank's, the story of his fierce fight with Cool Conrad.

Hank's was, at times, an all-night den; while a customer remained he did not shut his door, but was always ready to set out the ruinous liquor which had given his trap an unenviable reputation in the Merced region.

Marmoset and Floss were not far from the place when a peal of coarse laughter saluted their ears.

The pair stopped instantly, and exchanged looks.

"The hawks are awake," whispered the girl.

"You know they never sleep," was the reply. "The door is shut for once, but a fine crowd is on the inside. Ah! we'll take a peep at the men from Pistol City."

Unseen by a human eye, the young twain approached the saloon and placed their eyes near the cracks between the weather-boarding.

When their optics became accustomed to the light, they saw the same motley crowd, the same forms and faces which had encountered their gaze in the same place on former occasions.

"Only the band; Captain Noll is not there," said Marmoset.

"Captain Noll is hyer!" responded a stern voice behind them.

The two friends turned, but not quick enough.

With the last word spoken the heavy hands of the boss of Pistol City fell like trip-hammers on their shoulders and closed there, like the talons of some bird of prey.

"I always turn up, like the unexpected," continued Oregon Noll, with a brutal laugh. "I didn't look for fish like you in my net, but ye'r welcome all ther same. Come back ter spy out how the land lies, eh? Wal, I'll show yer!"

His strength was prodigious, and he started toward the door of Holy Hank's, dragging his prisoners after him, while his eyes gleamed with the triumph of the merciless desperado.

One blow with his heavy boot sent the saloon-door open to its full capacity, and he stood in the light that streamed suddenly from the den.

"Here's a picnic, pards," he exclaimed, as he stepped inside, Floss and Marmoset still in his clutches. "You don't ketch such fish as this every day."

The boisterous miner-pards stopped short in their merriment at the sight thus suddenly revealed, and fixed their eyes on the two captives.

"Whar'd ye run across thet find, cap'n!" cried a dozen voices at the same time.

"Found 'em outside hyer playin' eavesdroppers. Came up behind 'em while they war takin' in yer whole show, an' clapped my talons on ther birds. Floss an' Marmoset! Take a look at 'em, pards. They're old citizens ov Pistol City, but they've forfeited some ov their rights, eh?"

"They've forfeited every one!" was the mad flash. "Thet boy thar saved Red Roy from Satan's Hotel, an' Floss furnished Leo with ther six-shooter thet gave her liberty. They've got no rights in this camp, cap'n. Ask ther boys an' hear ther answer."

The dark-faced desperadoes of the gold camp had surrounded Captain Noll and his prisoners, and their looks told how eager they were to administer a punishment that should not be tinged with mercy.

Floss and Marmoset stood the mad looks without quailing; they had faced the pards of the camp before; why fear them now?

"Shall we jedge 'em, captain?" asked one of crowd.

"No! I'll attend ter that myself."

"An' you'll punish both?"

"Thet lies with me."

"Ov course he won't," growled a burly fellow behind the lot. "He won't touch ther girl he's raised. Ef he doesn't, mebbe we will. She rescued Leo when we wanted her blood! Go slow, Captain Noll. This is yer old stampin'-ground; but even hyer ye may lose yer grip."

Oregon Noll saw the lowering looks of the pards of Pistol City.

He knew each man and knew, too, just how to deal with the crowd as a whole.

"Whar's yer whip, Hank?" he asked suddenly turning to the man who leaned over the counter with two twinkling little eyes above his flabby cheeks.

"Ther one ther driver lost on ther trail, cap'n?"

"Yes."

The head and shoulders of Holy Hank disappeared for a moment, and then he threw a heavy black snake whip with a cutting lash upon the counter.

"Thar she ar', cap'n, keen as a razor in ther hands ov ther right party!" he exclaimed. "I kin cut a rattler's head off the first time at twenty feet with it."

"We'll try it on this camp pullet," grinned Captain Noll with a glance at Marmoset. "What do you think ov ther prospect, boy? Would yer rescue Red Roy ag'in?"

"I would succor a friend anytime," was the answer, and the boy's eyes wandered from the whip to Captain Noll's face without a sign of fear.

"You saved Red Roy, then?"

"Yes!"

"All right! Off with yer coat!"

Marmoset did not immediately obey the command.

He saw Holy Hank glide around the corner of the counter with the blacksnake in his hand, and with cruelty sparkling in the depths of his eyes.

"Hyer, boys. Strip this young galoot to ther waist!" said Oregon Noll to the crowd.

"Touch me not!" exclaimed the boy as he broke from his captor's somewhat loosened grip. "I'll do the stripping myself."

"Then be quick about it," grated Noll. "We're no slouches in Pistol City; when it comes ter takin' vengeance; you know thet yerself."

Shutting his teeth hard, as if he had resolved to stand the indignity without a murmur, Marmoset began to obey the merciless summons.

He was in the hands of a lot of men who would show no mercy.

It were vain to look for a single friend among the crowd: those who had been his friends in times gone by, were now fiercest in looks and words.

Where would the threatened whipping stop?

There was no telling this, and, knowing the crowd as he did, Marmoset had a right to imagine his body carried to the mountain graveyard after the terrible ordeal.

He took off his coat, or jacket, and cast it at his feet.

"Thet's progress!" laughed Captain Noll. "Now yer shirt, boy."

A deep crimson suffused Marmoset's face, and he looked up into the big desperado's face.

"Take Floss away," he said. "You will not force her to witness your hyena-like cruelty."

"No!" said the girl, before Oregon Noll could answer the boy. "I want to stay—I want to see it all. It will nerve my arm for vengeance; it will incur a debt which shall be paid with double interest."

"What's that?" cried Captain Noll, with a fierce look at the girl. "Do you talk about avengin' ther work ov ther whip on Marmoset's back? Beware, girl! A skin whiter than his may feel the lash!"

"I am ready," was the reply. "Your infamous pards want to see my blood flow, Captain Noll. Oblige them, if you like. I have nothing to take back. For each drop of blood cut from Marmoset I will call somebody to account!"

"Thet's yer daisy pard, captain!" laughed the crowd, derisively. "Whip ther boy, an' let her go ter git even with you? Whip them both!"

Under his mustache Oregon Noll bit his lip, and for a second made no reply.

"Aren't you goin' to peel?" he said suddenly to Marmoset.

"In Floss's presence?"

"Yes; she wants to stay. Didn't ye hear her? Stay she shall!"

Marmoset made no reply, but proceeded to divest himself of the garment which left him stripped to the waist, and his roseate skin glistening in the lamplight.

"Form a ring thar an' give Hank room," said Captain Noll.

The crowd obeyed, and in less than a minute Marmoset stood in the middle of a circle, his well-built figure drawn to the last inch of its true height, and his eyes defiant and ready for the worst.

Holy Hank stepped into the human inclosure with the whip in his hand.

There were few in the crowd who did not know that, at one time in his life, Hank had been a cattle-herder on the Southwestern frontier, and that he had used the cutting lash on the naked back of more than one fellow-human.

He was in his element, as his glittering orbs showed plainly as he stepped into the ring and cracked the whip over his head.

"Ready, I am, captain!" he said with a glance at Oregon Noll. "Say whar ther first cut shall be an' I'll git it thar. Deep er shallow? Take yer choice, captain. I kin cut ther bone, er just draw ther claret, ez yer wish. I've killed men with two cuts of ther whip!"

"So you have, villain," said Marmoset, catching Holy Hank's eye as he finished. "I've heard of more than one of your whipping matinees. You kill me here to-night with that whip, or I'll drop you some time in your boots!"

Holy Hank burst into a wild laugh.

"I'll see ter thet, my mountain pink!" he cried. "I never hed a whipped g'loot ter turn on me yet, an' I never will. Give ther signal, captain."

The eyes of all save those of Marmoset were riveted on Captain Noll.

Suddenly one of the bronzed hands went up.

"You kin go in, Hank. Let ther first cut be a feeler—a sample ov what's ter come!"

A devilish grin shot across Holy Hank's countenance, and the whip leaped into the air like the spring of a black snake.

For a second it made several lightning evolutions above his head, and then fell with a half-drowned crack across the boy's back!

Despite his resolved firmness, Marmoset's lips flew apart, and he seemed to leave the floor!

It was a terrible blow, and one which drew blood like a razor would have done.

"Sample number one!" laughed Holy Hank. "Ther next one will be better still!"

Up went the whip again, but all at once Floss sprung across the arena and flew like a tigress at the whipper's wrist.

"You've gone far enough!" she cried. "You've drawn blood enough to doom you all to death!"

From Holy Hank's wrist the hands of the girl leaped to the whip itself, and before one of the miner-desperadoes could recover and arrest her intention, she had wrenched it from the bar-keeper's grip.

"The whip is no new thing in my hands!" cried the girl as she started back. "Stand where you are, men of Pistol City. It is my turn to draw a little blood, and I'll draw the meanest to be found among you!"

The astonished and speechless crowd saw the bloody lash leap above the girl's head, they heard it crack in mid-air, and the next second a yell that seemed to shake the roof of the saloon told that it had fallen with a knife-like cut across Holy Hank's face!

All this seemed the work of less than a minute, and the man who a short time before was in his element, danced in the arena with oaths of madness, and cheeks cut to the bone!

"It's a game two can play," said the fearless girl to the crowd. "Take that man away, or I'll whip him to death!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

CUTTING HER WAY OUT.

BRAVE as a lion when he had things his own way, but a coward at heart when anybody held the upper hand as against him, Holy Hank shrunk from the girl who now pointed scornfully at him with one hand while the other clutched the whip.

Her threat to whip Holy Hank to death if he was not removed forthwith had a singular effect.

Some of the desperadoes grinned at the thought of Floss getting the upper hand of the man who sold the worst whisky in California, and others glared at her like savages.

Hank's face was already covered with blood which had issued from the gash inflicted by the lash, and he presented a ludicrous as well as hideous aspect.

"Hyer! we've had enough ov this display," suddenly said Captain Noll as one stride carried him half-way across the arena, and he caught the girl's arm. "Back out an' let Holy Hank carry out his orders!"

"Not while I hold his own weapon," she said, returning Noll's look with interest. "Let him throw a foot forward, and I'll cut his face into strips."

She jerked loose from the big desperado's clutch as the last sentence fell from her tongue, and straightening before him threw a challenge toward Holy Hank.

Captain Noll for once in his life was embarrassed.

What to do with the girl he did not know.

He could disarm her himself, or, by lifting his hand, he could precipitate upon her the blood-thirsty men-tigers of Pistol City, who would not only disarm her, but would inflict a punishment that would do Hank's heart good.

Meanwhile, Marmoset had not stirred since the girl's startling interference.

His back had been cut open by the one blow inflicted by the whip.

The stroke seemed to have paralyzed him.

But all at once, when Floss turned upon Captain Noll and demanded to be released from captivity, he started into life and sprung to her side.

"Don't touch her!" shouted Oregon Noll pointing madly at Marmoset. "Don't say you're goin' ter stan' by my property, er by heavens! we'll whip yer ter death afore her eyes."

"Your property?" echoed Floss and her eyes seemed to ignite. "When did I become your property, Captain Noll?"

"Whose girl ar' ye ef not mine, ha, ha!" laughed the camp villain.

"Yours? I am free! I owe nothing to any living man!" was the quick answer.

"Who fetched yer ter Pistol City?"

"You."

"Sartinly."

"But that circumstance doesn't make me yours."

"It doesn't, hey? Thet's jest what we're about ter settle. Come away from thet youngster."

Floss made no answer, but seemed to plant herself more firmly at Marmoset's side.

"Won't, eh?" and the next instant Captain Noll whipped out a six-shooter and leveled it at Marmoset's breast.

"Stand back, men, an' let me win this game," he continued with a glance at the roughs of the camp. "Never in my life hev I been balked by a girl. Now, my mountain daisy, jest step cl'ar ov thet tenderfoot, er see 'im tumble backward with a bullet in his body!"

Marmoset was completely covered by the revolver of the captain of the camp pards.

He looked into Oregon Noll's eyes and saw no mercy in their depths.

"Forward, Floss! Show some sense once in yer life," said the desperado.

"You will kill him if I stand here?"

"Try me an' see."

Pure-Gold Floss threw a meanful glance at Marmoset, and stepped toward Captain Noll.

She passed so near the leveled revolver that she might have knocked it down, but she did not, for she knew that no quicker man with the trigger than the gold sport inhabited the Golden State.

She passed to Captain Noll's side and looked up into his face.

"Now throw yer whip at Holy Hank's feet," was the next command.

Floss glanced at the whip still clutched in her hand and hesitated.

They were going to whip Marmoset again; the deed but half done was to be completed.

It should not be.

Holy Hank gnashed his teeth and stepped forward to receive the whip as Oregon Noll spoke the command.

He had attempted to wipe the blood from his face with his sleeve, and in doing so had increased his hideousness.

"Drop ther whip, Floss! Don't be a fool!" said Noll, glaring at the girl, who still clung to the implement of torture.

"Throw it at his feet?" she suddenly exclaimed. "I will never do that. He would use it on Marmoset's back again."

"Thet's ther programme, exactly!" was the retort.

"Then I'll use the whip for another purpose!" murmured Floss, under her breath, and all at once she sprung toward the tin lamp which hung against the weather-boarding at the end of the bar, and by aid of its reflector, furnished light for the whole room.

Nobody seemed to divine her purpose until she had successfully accomplished it.

All at once she paused within seven feet of the lamp and cut it such a blow with the heavy whiplash that she knocked it, reflector and all, from its support, and it disappeared with a crash behind the counter, leaving the interior of the place in pitch darkness.

It was an unexpected coup, well-played, and over with before a hand could be raised to prevent it.

In an instant loud curses and cries arose on every side.

"Shut ther door! Don't let ther two kids out! We'll hev ther blood for this work!"

Forty hands darted at Floss in the darkness, but a noiseless bound carried her to the door.

"My revolver's stolen!" suddenly exclaimed a voice. "Look out! the girl will shoot!"

"Yes," answered Floss, at the door, as a white figure leaped from the saloon. "The man who shows his face drops dead in his boots! Men of Pistol City, the birds lately in your hands have returned to the bush!"

A loud cry of baffled rage met these words, and the camp roughs nearest the door involuntarily recoiled.

"Put out yer matches," said a whisper on the inside. "Don't give ther Californy pantheress a chance ter pick yer out."

A smile played at the corners of Floss's mouth. She recognized the voice, and could not but smile at Captain Noll's fear.

Slowly and unseen she backed from the door, and joined a few feet away a youth who had just put on a jacket.

"It was by a scratch, Floss," said the youth, who was Marmoset, with a smile. "I owe it all to you. I will pay Holy Hank for his whip-gash."

"Yes, but not now. Come. Our visit to camp has almost proved fatal."

Ten minutes later the sole person in Holy Hank's bar-room was the proprietor himself, and he was patching up his face with the assistance of a greasy mirror and strips of adhesive linen.

Between the laying on of the strips he was cursing in no pleasant tones the girl who had laid his face open with his own whip, and vowing to get even with her in a manner that should never be forgotten.

Holy Hank's face presented a very singular appearance when he had completed his surgery, and he helped himself to a glass of his own vile liquor in a self-congratulatory way—then he said:

"Not as purty as I war, but with more sense. Arter this mebbe, I'll obey Captain Noll an' mebbe I won't. By Jehu! thet girl kin make a black-snake sting like a scorpion!"

Holy Hank was putting the mirror back to its place above the counter when a footstep caused him to turn toward the door, and he saw Keno King, one of Oregon Noll's right bowers, sliding across the floor.

"Ar' ye in fer a big capture, Hank?" asked the pard.

All at once the whisky spider's eyes lighted up with animation.

"Ef it's ter git even with thet girl, I am!" he said.

"It's hardly thet, Hank, but it's suthin' jest ez important. Show up yer bottle first."

Keno King took a good draught from the black bottle which Hank pushed over the counter toward him, and the genius of the mountain trap

took a brace of revolvers out of a drawer under the counter.

"Whar's Captain Noll an' ther boys?" he asked as he came out on the floor equipped for battle.

"They're huntin' Floss an' her pard. I slipped away from 'em, an' at ther right time, too. I made a diskivery, Hank, thet entitles me ter a gold medal."

"What is it, Keno?"

"Foller me an' see."

Holy Hank was eager enough, and the two men left the saloon together.

In the right of each was a cocked revolver of the largest pattern, and a mate stuck in their leathern belts.

"Halt!" suddenly whispered Keno King.

"Right ahead ov us is a cabin. Whose is it, Hank?"

"It b'longs ter Floss, but ov course it's empty now."

"Don't be too sure ov thet. Ten ter one thet ther shanty's inhabited, an' thet by a person whose blood Pistol City wants."

"Who's in thar?"

"Cool Conrad, ther Dakota blood-leech!"

Holy Hank recoiled with a low exclamation of amazement.

"Thet can't be! What did ther captain say about ther bowie duel since sundown?"

"I don't keer what Captain Noll said. He's thar—ther man this gold camp wants."

"Prove it."

"Thet's jist what I'm goin' ter do. Stand by me, Hank, an' we'll capture ther Dakotan in less than five minutes."

Keno King stepped into one of the adjoining cabins, but soon reappeared with an armful of inflammable material which he carried to the cabin and applied without noise under the dry eave.

Then he drew a match from his pocket and ignited the kindling.

"Now hands at trigger an' eyes on the alert!" he said as he stepped back to Holy Hank's side.

"We'll hev ther wounded snake out before long."

"Wounded?"

"Yes; didn't Oregon Noll give him his bowie awhile ago?"

"Ov course, but ther captain said he finished him."

"Wal, ther captain didn't know; thet's all. Now, watch."

The two pards stepped back and watched the roof blaze up.

The fire, aided by a smart wind, made good headway, and in a short time the whole roof was a mass of flame.

"He can't stand it long," said Keno King.

Within the next minute the cabin door flew open and a jet of fire leaped at the two men.

Keno King threw up his hands and dropped at Holy Hank's feet—dead!

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROBBED OF HIS PREY.

"BACK to your den. I don't want your blood!" said the individual who stood in the glare of the burning cabin and faced Holy Hank, while Keno King lay stretched on the ground the loaded revolvers clutched by his stiffening fingers.

The saloon spider looked once at the speaker and then began to retreat.

"Thet war a poor scheme for Keno," he said to himself. "Ef Cool Conrad ar' wounded, he doesn't show it much. I guess I'll go back an' lay for ther girl what cut me with ther whip. I'll hev her blue blood for thet lik, er my name's not Holy Hank ov Pistol City."

The man who had suddenly emerged from the burning cabin was the Dakota Detective.

The fire had driven him from the retreat, and he left it in the nick of time, for Hank had scarcely turned his back on him ere the roof fell in with a crash.

If the barkeeper had used his eyes he might have seen that Cool Conrad was not in the best condition physically.

His face bore traces of suffering, but his flashing eyes and compressed lips told that resolution would take him to the end of the trail.

He walked to Keno King, his stalwart victim lying in the firelight, and looked down upon the body with the mien of a victor.

"He was in the Colorado canyon that day," he said. "Give me time and strength, oh Heaven! and I will get them all!"

"You will if I don't get some of them," said a voice at his elbow.

Cool Conrad turned and saw a face that caused him to start.

Leo stood before him, Leo with the deep black eyes, and lovely face and figure.

"Did you slay that man?" continued the huntress as her finger pointed downward at the body on the ground.

"Why not? He was one of the eight," said the detective.

"And as much my man as yours."

"But I reached him first," smiled Conrad. "If you want those men, Leo, you must find them before I do."

There was triumph in the speaker's tones; it brightened the light in Leo's eyes.

"When did you come to camp?" she asked.

"Perhaps an hour ago."

"And is this your first victim to-night?"

"Yes. I might have dropped his companion, but I didn't want his blood."

"Who fired the shanty?"

"The dead man. He wanted to smoke me out, and he did, to his sorrow."

"You don't know what happened here since you came, perhaps?"

"No."

"Events almost thrilling. Holy Hank's saloon was the theater of them. The boy and the girl, Marmoset and Floss, stole back to camp and fell into Captain Noll's hands. A scene followed. The desperadoes were going to whip the boy to death, but the girl interfered after the first blow, and whipped the whipper with his own lash."

"Did you see it?"

"No. I encountered the pair escaping and learned it all in a few words."

"Then she drew blood? Good!" exclaimed Cool Conrad. "I didn't want any of Oregon Noll's blood spilled before—"

"None has been shed," interrupted Leo. "She whipped Holy Hank."

"That will do! Look here, woman. Will you not go back to your home and let me finish this trail unmolested?"

Leo smiled.

"Home? I have none," she said. "And, what is more, I will not leave this trail!"

She spoke in a manner that impressed the avenger-detective with the stern purpose that had throw her on the trail.

"Nothing shall turn me back," she went on.

"Only a little while ago I encountered a panther. It tried to turn me back but I would not have it. I shot the beast and sent him screaming up the mountain. You are Albert's brother. I know that—"

"And you—"

"I was his betrothed."

Cool Conrad seemed to start.

"This is why you are on the trail? I did not know that my brother ever loved."

"He loved me, but the noose of the merciless eight broke our happy dreams. Now, do you still want me to go back?"

"Yes," and the detective's hand fell gently on Leo's arm while their eyes met. "Now, more than ever, do I plead with you to go back. Let me, a man and Albert's brother, get to the end of this life-hunt. The band is not so large now. Monte Merle, Jaguar Jerry and Keno King, lying before us, have paid the penalty of that atrocious crime. I know all the rest. They are all spotted. Mar not your love for my brother with bloody hands. Heaven will remit your oath, and I will fight mine to the end. Go back. One of these days I will enter your presence and say: 'It is done.' Go to 'Frisco and await me there."

It was an appeal hard to resist, and Cool Conrad spoke an with earnestness that tried the beautiful woman's soul.

The cabin had almost ceased to burn for the logs did not ignite, and only the dry roof had been consumed.

"Pardon me; I cannot go back," said Leo, a moment after Conrad had concluded. "I shall never ask Heaven to remit the vow I took when I heard of Albert's end. You plead in vain with me, Cool Conrad. This is my trail as much as it is yours. I follow it till the end has been reached."

"Very well," said the detective, shutting his lips hard behind the last word. "Go on, but remember that if I can prevent it, your hands—the hands once kissed by Albert—shall not shed his slayer's blood!"

"Shall not, do you say?" laughed Leo.

"That is what I have said."

"I will not forget that. You cannot drive me from this mountain man-hunt, Cool Conrad. But are you going to stay here till Captain Noll and his pards come back from their hunt for Marmoset and Floss?"

"That is my lookout," was the tart reply.

"Stay, then," said Leo as tartly, and a moment later she was walking off leaving Cool Conrad gazing strangely after her until she disappeared.

"Albert's betrothed and his avenger, eh?" he said to himself before he left the spot. "I love her because she loved the boy. Leo! Leo!"

There was no answer, for the fair huntress was gone and the sound of his voice reached her not.

Cool Conrad stood a few moments longer on the spot where he had encountered Leo, and then walked away.

"Hello! what's been on fire hyer?" suddenly asked a rough voice some distance from the Dakotan.

In an instant Cool Conrad stood still and waited for the reply.

"It war Floss's shanty. By Jove! captain, we've hed a time hyer since you've been gone."

"What's happened?"

"Keno King tracked thet man-tiger from Dakota ter Floss's shanty—"

"Cool Conrad?"

"Yes."

"Thet's not true! I left him lyin' dead in ther trail whar I fought him knife ter knife!"

"Mebbe so, captain, but by Jupiter! ef it

warn't him Keno tracked down, it war his twin brother."

"Whar's Keno?"

"Dead."

"Dead?"

"Shot by ther man what come out ov ther cabin while it war in a blaze."

"Do yer hear thet, pards? While we war huntin' ther young birds thet got out ov our hands thar came a human cyclone ter camp. I'm mad enough ter chaw a bowlder. An' he got away?"

"Yes. Ther door opened, ez I war goin' ter say, an' ther man an' a bullet came out at ther same time. Keno stopped ther lead."

Several mad curses were the responses.

"Which trail did ther dropper take?"

"I didn't stay ter see. I war kivered myself afore I could draw. I hed ter leave ther field, but, by Jehu! I went back with my face ter ther foe."

A derisive laugh at Holy Hank's expense followed the last words, but the stern voice of Captain Noll soon put a stop to it.

"Show us Keno King!" he said. "Over him I'll make every man in Pistol City a blood-hunter. Shot by Cool Conrad, eh? I thought I had killed him with my bowie. I war a fool fer not leavin' it in his heart."

Cool Conrad heard the tramp of the crowd being piloted by Holy Hank to the spot where Keno King lay with his handsome but death-struck features turned toward the stars.

He listened with a satisfied smile at the corners of his mouth, for the night was intensely clear, and the words spoken at a distance were easily heard.

"Swear over your dead pard any oath you please," he murmured. "Flash your bowies in the starlight and cry for my blood. I am here."

Several minutes later he heard a loud voice, and as he leaned eagerly forward, his ears were saluted with the words of a terrible oath.

He heard it all, the wild words of revenge as they dropped one by one in burning accents from Captain Noll's lips, and the quick and ferocious response given by the men by whom he was surrounded.

The winds did not let him miss a syllable; he even heard the low words which commanded the men of Pistol City to bear the corpse of Keno King to the mountain cemetery.

"We'll plant the pard right away," said Captain Noll, "an' then we'll turn from his grave to the trail of his killer."

Before he moved away he heard certain sounds which told him that the march to the graveyard on the mountain-side had begun, and they seemed musical notes to his ears as he walked slowly from the spot.

"Bury him! I'll not molest you," he said, speaking half-aloud to himself. "Pronounce over Keno King's grave a eulogy on his crimes. Then, throw the clods of the mountain on him and turn on me."

Cool Conrad reached the suburbs of the camp and paused a few moments as if to rest himself.

He saw a light moving hither and thither like a will-o'-the-wisp some distance above the streets of the camp and his attention remained fixed on it some time.

"It is coming down now," he suddenly exclaimed. "The dead is buried, and the living are swearing anew the oath of vengeance."

He waited some time longer by the bowlder where he had stopped and then moved away.

"If I am not mistaken the next stroke will include Captain Noll himself. Then I will hunt down the missing pard—Silver Chick. I fancy he will not be hard to find."

Cool Conrad was moving slowly over the narrow trail lit by the stars when he paused suddenly and listened.

"Tracked!" he said under his breath. "I am followed, whether by man or beast I do not know. There! the footsteps have ceased. I will try them again."

He resumed his journey, but listening all the while.

Suddenly his eye gleamed again.

He was not mistaken.

A hunter was on his track, perhaps more than one.

"I've made up my mind to fight everything that opposes me," he said, through clinched teeth. "The trailer behind me knows that I am here."

He waited a few moments longer, and stood erect with a revolver in his right hand.

His eyes wandered through the starlight with a gleam of fierceness that betokened his determination.

Suddenly up went the cocked weapon, and Cool Conrad leaned forward.

"Halt! Hands up, or die!" he said.

A human figure straightened in the trail.

"For God's sake, don't shoot!" it said.

The Dakota Detective started slightly.

"Come forward!" he said. "Remember that I've got the dead-drop on you. A treacherous movement on your part, and I send a bullet through your head."

"Thet's jist what I don't want."

Within the same minute the two men came

together, and Cool Conrad had another sentence on his lips when the menaced trailer continued:

"Don't you know me? I'm Red Roy. By George! I'm even with Captain Noll, at last. I hanged him fer lowerin' me inter Satan's Hotel, but somebody cut him down. This time salt-peter won't save ther boss devil ov Pistol City."

"What have you done?" asked Cool Conrad, savagely.

"Jest what I hed a right ter do. I left Captain Noll dead in his shanty, a little while ago! Thet's what he got fer makin' me a guest ov Satan's Hotel!"

A mad oath, that sent a thrill through Red Roy, sprung like a hissing serpent from Cool Conrad's lips.

The next instant his left hand shot forward and landed on the big rough's shoulder, while the revolver in the detective's right hand almost touched his face.

"Did you do that, Red Roy? Have you really killed Oregon Noll?"

"I should say I hev. But, hedn't I a right ter?"

"You? no! He was mine! But, how did you kill him?"

"I opened the door of his shanty, got a glimpse of him at his table, an' painted ther wall with his brains. He put me inter Satan's Hotel, sir. You forget thet."

Cool Conrad looked into Red Roy's face a moment longer, and then lowered his revolver and walked away.

"Don't follow me. I might kill you!" he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A GREASER ON DECK.

"SHOT by an avenger an' clawed by a panther! *Sacrista!* I am worth a camp ov dead men yet!"

The speaker stood in a mountain trail with the last beams of day about him.

His garments bore evidences of a tussle with a beast of some kind, no doubt a panther, as he had just mentioned, and he looked ready to renew the combat if the enemy would but show himself and seek the encounter.

It was the second night after the events that take up the chapter before this, and the man in the trail was the villain the Mexican serpent called Doctor Pablo at Pistol City.

Alive yet despite his misfortunes, and quite ready to commit any deed that would to the slightest degree satiate his revenge.

If Leo knew that Santa Cruz still lived, would she not turn for a moment from Captain Noll and his pards to hunt him to the bitter end?

She had fired point-blank at the Mexican's breast, but she did not know that the blade of a knife concealed under his jacket had turned the ball aside, and sent it into a part of his body a few inches from the citadel of life.

So Doctor Pablo was yet at large, and the yellow serpent was able to crawl and to dart madness from his little eyes.

Was he going back to Pistol City?

He stood in the trail like a person waiting for night to come that he might carry out some project which the light of day would baffle.

He saw the last streaks of day fade from the west and then he started forward again.

"There's nothin' I'd like better than to find Leo," he said. "I remember her when a little girl—how she came back to the ranch that day with her father an' found it in ashes. *Peste!* how she cried an' how her father cursed. He never thought that I did it, that by that stroke I paid him for his severe orders. She doesn't know the secret I still possess. Ha! ha! Leo! if you knew what Doctor Pablo knows you would turn from your blood trail for a while."

The Mexican's eyes glittered for a minute, and then he went on:

"I can strike again, my southern flower!" he exclaimed. "Your bullet found my knife, not the heart you aimed at, an' I will still be master of a part of the gold region. Silver Chick will never hold me up for you to strike. When I have finished you I will turn on him!"

A mile from the spot where we found him at the head of the present chapter the Mexican halted suddenly, and drew back behind a rock.

"Ha! ha!" rung out a voice that startled him and brightened his eyes with evil again. "You have caused me to hope for years of happiness."

"I am glad of that," was the answer, coming from a point down the trail. "When I first met you I never dreamed of this."

"Nor I. I thought they all perished at the hands of that villain of villains, Santa Cruz."

The last name caused Doctor Pablo to crane his neck forward, and to tighten his grip on the revolver in his right hand.

"*Dios!* what's that?" he ejaculated. "Is fortune bringing the huntress into my clutches?"

He grew impatient and eagerness seemed to be devouring him.

He put one foot forward and tried to look down the trail, which was a winding one at that point, but a sudden bend prevented.

The voices he had heard were the voices of women, young in life, and not far away.

They were coming toward him, mounted, for his acute ears could hear the hoofs of horses strike the stones which protruded above the trail at intervals.

"I am glad that we have met," suddenly resumed one of the unseen females. "I never thought to see you any more. I was taken from the house before it was fired. I was sent into Mexico and there I afterward found Captain Noll, who made me his *protegee* and brought me to Pistol City. Some time later Doctor Pablo came to the camp. I did not dream that he was the cause of all our sorrow, for the scar which he wears above his eyes changed him from Santa Cruz."

"But he could not balk me forever, Floss," was the quick reply. "The best disguise in the world could not hide the real serpent from me."

"Heavens! if I had stumbled on the truth during my life in Pistol City, I would have avenged the past. I would have paid him back for the most terrible night of our lives, sister."

"Sister? *Sacrista!*" growled Doctor Pablo, waiting beside the rock. "They have met, an' all is known. I wonder how they recognized each other?"

He had to wait but a minute longer, and then two horses with riders loomed up between him and the brilliant stars which had come into existence as it were at the death of day.

"Come on, my beauties!" he fairly hissed.

"Ride into the clutches of the man you have been cursing. Come forward into the hands of Doctor Pablo. You haven't forgotten the past, it seems, *senoritas*; neither have I!"

Like a spider at the mouth of his den watches for the fly that approaches his thrall, so the Mexican waited for the two people riding in a slow walk toward his rock.

His eyes became balls of fire and he could hardly control his intense eagerness.

"Come on, my doves! Now that you have found each other out, you will also find Doctor Pablo when you don't look for him. A moment more an' I'll have you both."

The two riders of the horses were plainly seen—two sylph-like figures side by side in the mountain trail.

All at once the figure of Doctor Pablo straightened and stepped into the road.

"Halt!" he said in distinct and triumphant tones, and the two hands that shot forward instantly covered the riders of the horses with cocked revolvers.

"Heavens! it is Doctor Pablo!" exclaimed one of the women.

"No! it cannot be," was the response.

"It is! it is! Look for yourself, Leo!"

"Yes, I am Doctor Pablo!" hissed the hunted Mexican. "You ladies have ridden into a sleek trap which the night set for me! Ha! you were not lookin' for me here. Don't touch your pistols, *senoritas*, I see your hands, an' my fingers are at my triggers."

The two females who were Leo and Floss could not keep back looks of wonder and amazement.

They had ridden into the clutches of one of the biggest scoundrels in the gold region, and one who, judging from the past, would not shrink from any deed.

"Throw your pistols away!" continued the Mexican in a voice of command. "I see fit to disarm you, *senoritas*. Throw them to the left where the grass is. Quick! Don't hesitate! I am Santa Cruz."

An exclamation parted Leo's lips at the mention of this well-hated name.

"Santa Cruz! and the meanest man above ground! Retribution is only retarded by this success of yours. It cannot be put back forever."

"Away with the pistols!" was the response. "The mornin' will come by an' by."

Sullenly and only because they were compelled to on peril of life, the two girls drew their weapons, and threw them into the grass at the side of the trail.

"There! does that satisfy you?" asked Leo.

"Perfectly," was the answer. "Now come forward. You were goin' the right way. We will all go to Pistol City."

"To the camp?" exclaimed the two girls at one breath.

"Why not? Does not Floss belong there an' do not the men of Pistol City want Leo?" laughed Doctor Pablo.

Leo shot her companion a quick look.

"Very well; to the gold-camp be it," she said, turning to the yellow desperado, and the two horses moved forward while Doctor Pablo awaited them in the middle of the trail.

With glittering eyes he suddenly placed himself between the steeds, and looked up at his prisoners.

"We go to Pistol City now. Forward!" he said and then quickly added:

"Slowly, *senoritas*. A gallop might empty two saddles!"

The fair couple understood that threat and obeyed the scamp.

The next few minutes witnessed the spectacle of two horses moving in a walk over the trail with a man walking between them with a cocked pistol in each hand.

How his eyes snapped, and how his countenance seemed to flash with the unexpected triumph he had won!

He was glancing up at his captives almost constantly through his long black lashes; he watched them like a hawk.

"Oh, for a chance stroke!" murmured Leo as she contemplated the cunning of the devil between the horses. "Great heavens! are we to be conducted back among the lions by this monster? Must we be thrown into their jaws helpless, and powerless, to resist? Give me a moment for vengeance—a second's time for a stroke!"

The prayer of the beautiful huntress seemed uttered in vain, for the vigilance of Doctor Pablo was not relaxed for an instant, and the horses were nearing Pistol City as Floss knew by familiar scenery.

"They'll receive you with open arms; ha! ha!" suddenly chuckled the desperado looking up into the faces of his captives. "Captain Noll will be glad to welcome *Senorita* Floss home; an' you, Leo—*caramba!* mebbe Doctor Pablo will pay you back for you shot before the whole camp."

"Do it!" cried Leo, bending toward the Mexican and lowering her voice to a defiant hiss. "I tell you here that you will have to play your present hand shrewdly or I will hold the best cards when the game ends. If you want to pay me for my shot which failed, I see, to kill, do it now and here. Don't wait till you enter Pistol City for your stroke. You might fail there. Here you have things your own way. Take my advice and strike while you have such a brilliant opportunity."

The only reply Leo got was a sudden gleam in Doctor Pablo's eyes, [and the shine of the teeth he showed in a grin.

"Wait, then, and fail," said Leo, resuming her old position. "There's many a slip, Doctor Pablo, between jail and scaffold."

Still no reply on the Mexican's part, and his reticence told that he had resolved not to be drawn into a display of passion.

Leo looked triumphant when she showed Floss her face again, and the two prisoners watched the yellow sport as narrowly as before.

All at once a light like a star burning along the horizon greeted the eyes of the trio.

Leo and Floss exchanged quick glances, and Doctor Pablo smiled to himself.

They all knew what it meant.

Pistol City was but a short distance ahead.

The trail descended for a little distance, and then reached a level with the light.

"We are here, *senoritas*," said Doctor Pablo aloud speaking for the first time in many minutes. "The pards of Pistol City will soon be surprised. We'll find 'em all at *Senor* Hank's."

Leo started at the name that finished the last sentence.

She recalled her last experience at the famous whisky den, her peril and her rescue by Floss who threw a pistol over the heads of the desperate crowd in the nick of time.

And now she was going back there Doctor Pablo said—going back to face the same villains once more, and this time without a hope of rescue!

The prospect was not inviting; it was perilous.

A short time afterward the trio found themselves among the rough cabins.

"Forward to *Senor* Hank's, *senoritas!*" said Doctor Pablo. "*Peste!* hear the hyenas of the mountains swearin' over their whisky!"

The horses, guided by the yellow sport, passed down the narrow street of the gold camp.

"Halt!" said Doctor Pablo stopping in front of the most famous place in gold-land. "Hello! in thar, pards! Come out and see yer doctor's catch!"

In a moment the loud noises beyond the threshold of the whisky-den grew still, and then several stalwart figures and bearded faces appeared at the door.

"Doctor Pablo, by Jupiter!" cried one. "Bring out the lamp! Ther Greaser ain't alone. He ketched suthin' in ther mountains."

In a second, as it were, the tin lamp that lit up the interior of the place—and the same one which we have seen Floss cut down with the whip—was jerked from its place on the wall and brought out.

"Jehu! ther two daisies!" was the exclamation that soared starward. "Whar did yer run ag'in' 'em, doctor?"

"They stumbled onter me!" laughed the Mexican. "I warn't lookin' for 'em when they came up. I fetched 'em hyer fer punishment, *senors*. Captain Noll kin tend ter ther young one. I owe Leo thar a grudge an' with yer permission, *senors*, I'll pay 'er hyer!"

"No yer don't, doctor!" said the men who started forward. "We'll settle with her ourselves. You hed yer time among ther mountains. Why didn't yer git even thar?"

Doctor Pablo looked daggers at the crowd, and behind his lips he ground his teeth till they fairly cracked.

"Keep off!" he grated, displaying his two revolvers to the pards of the gold camp. "You kin take ther youngest one, I say, but the other one I claim."

The Mexican faced the mad crowd with the mien of an enraged lion.

"Floss kin b'long ter Captain Noll. I don't object ter thet," he went on. "But Leo has been huntin' my blood for years, an' I have a right ter strike her for sheddin' it!"

The whole crowd stood before Holy Hank's

and the man who had brought the lamp out had fixed it on a nail above the door.

"Give us both girls!" demanded the gold-camp roughs. "You wouldn't live a minute, Doctor Pablo, ef yer teched ther one called Leo. Git out from between them hosses!"

The Mexican did not stir.

"We give yer ten seconds, doctor. Don't be a fool!"

"And I give all of you but five seconds in which to march back into Holy Hank's. I've taken a hand in this game myself. I include you, Doctor Pablo. March!"

The roughs of Pistol City turned toward the person who had thus suddenly spoken in language not to be mistaken.

The lamp-light was thrown some distance around by the tin reflector behind it, and the desperate men saw the speaker.

He stood a few feet away, and in his outstretched hands were two revolvers.

"Marmoset! by heavens!" ejaculated a dozen voices as the speaker involuntarily shrunk from the leveled weapons. "Thar's death in ther young galoot's eyes, boys!"

"And death in my revolvers! Back into Holy Hank's! Within five seconds I seal the doom of a dozen men!"

The young miner stood erect and firm.

"Back into the s'loon, pards. Ther boy's got ther upper hand, but he can't play it long." And in obedience to these words there was a rush toward the open door of the whisky trap.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CAST OF A LARIAT.

"RIDE toward me, but don't get between me and the door," continued Marmoset in lower tones to the two females who were regarding him with manifestations of gratitude. "They say I shan't play the hand I hold very long. We will see about that. I guess there will be no sacrifice of female beauty in Pistol City this night."

Floss and Leo were not long in obeying the youth's command, and a few moments later their horses had borne them past him.

"We don't want ter stay in camp long," Marmoset went on. "I've riled ther hyenas of Pistol City, and we can't keep 'em caged up all the time. I came in time, didn't I?"

"In the very nick of time," said Floss. "We will ride back and get the weapons Doctor Pablo forced us to throw away. Armed again, we can protect ourselves."

Leo, who did not speak, was gazing toward Holy Hank's place, as if she did not like to retreat without striking a return blow against the infamous Mexican whose diabolical plans had almost succeeded.

At any moment the pards of the gold camp were liable to rush out and charge the trio standing in the starlight, and their safety lay in an immediate retreat.

"We will meet yet, Doctor Pablo," murmured Leo. "The hour of final settlement is not far away. Heaven has spared you for a worse torture than that inflicted by the death-bullet!"

The two girls turned the heads of their steeds toward the frowning mountain, but Marmoset kept a bold front toward the whisky-den, and unmolested because of the revolvers the boy held resolutely in his hands, the trio effected their retreat.

In Holy Hank's den, it is needless to say, there was chagrin and bitter oaths.

"Ef you hedn't stuck up fer yer right ter deal with Leo, we'd not hev lost ther birds!" said the stalwart ruffian, who had wheeled suddenly upon Doctor Pablo. "Confound yer! you've been a nuisance ter Pistol City from ther day yer feet first trod its streets."

"Slit ther Greaser's throat!" came the cry from behind the speaker. "Let's git rid ov ther camp Jonah while we've got ther chance."

The Mexican looked toward the door and displayed a pair of flashing eyes and a brace of cocked revolvers.

"Don't let 'im show his teeth thet way! Down with ther Greaser dog! Throttle 'im, Fancy Joe!"

The last command drove the man called Fancy Joe upon Doctor Pablo like the outburst of a cyclone.

Up went the doctor's revolvers, but the charger was too quick for him, and a curse and several triumphal ejaculations announced that he had been outwitted.

The pistols were torn from the Mexican's hands as Fancy Joe's hand tightened at his throat, and he was held up to the gaze and the derision of all.

"Tumble him down Satan's Hotel. Hurrah! Throw him headlong down the way we failed ter send Red Roy!"

That was enough.

The whole crowd started for the door with a series of yells that would have been creditable to demons, and in less than two minutes Doctor Pablo was being rushed over the ground at a speed that would soon take him to doom.

He looked daggers at his captors, but kept his lips sealed.

Though a venomous coward at heart, he knew it would be foolish to plead with Fancy Joe and his pards for mercy.

He evidently saw that he had made a mistake in not dealing with Leo in the mountains when he had her completely in his clutches, but now he had little time for reflection and none for regrets.

It did not take the crowd long to reach the yawning pit with their victim.

Still in the grip of Fancy Joe, Doctor Pablo was pushed to the brink of the horrid place and made to look down into its blackness.

A cold shudder ran through his frame, and his involuntary recoil was greeted with a derisive laugh.

"Whar's a rope?" cried Fancy Joe. "We'll let 'im hang amid ther darkness long enough ter reflect over his sins, an' all ov a sudden we'll cut ther rope an' let 'im drap!"

A few moments sufficed to place a stout rope under Doctor Pablo's armpits and he was lowered without ceremony into the abyss.

"Thar ye ar', doctor! When ye drap ye'll go down like a cannon-ball an' ther bounce will be terrible. Fare ye well, my Mexican daisy. Ther rope 'll be cut when you don't expect it, mebbe, an' then hurrah fer ther cellar of Satan's Hotel!"

The doomed Mexican sent a mad curse upward, and then heard the footsteps and coarse jeers of the miner-roughs as they walked away.

They went back to their old retreat, probably to celebrate their victory over the Mexican in bumpers of whisky, and Doctor Pablo was left to the doom so suddenly prepared and executed.

"Now I'll pick out the two left here, and then hunt down Silver Chick," said a man who at the same moment entered Pistol City on the west. "Red Roy took vengeance out of my hands by shooting Captain Noll in his cabin. I should have shot Red Roy, but I had not the heart to do it."

This man was Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective, the tireless hunter, and a man with the most terrible of motives.

He might leave Pistol City for awhile, but he always came back as if the completion of his hunt belonged there.

On this occasion he had come back alone.

We saw him last separating from Red Roy who told him that he had scattered Oregon Noll's brains over his cabin walls for lowering him into the dark depths of Satan's Hotel.

If this was true, there were but two of Albert's hangmen left in Pistol City, and Cool Conrad had come back for them.

By the merest chance he had missed Marmoset and his companions in retreat from the miner-pards, and he now walked among the cabins, resolved on taking two lives.

As if he knew where to find the two pards, he walked straight toward Holy Hank's.

Cool Conrad knew his men; he had marked them during his visit as Sombrero Sam, and they could not escape him among the crowd.

He paused within ten feet of the open door of the gaming-trap.

"Help 'im up on ther counter! Never mind his boots!" cried a loud voice. "Lift 'im up thar, pards. Dan's got a toast we kin all drink. Dan's a poic. Up he goes! Hurrah!"

Cool Conrad saw the big fellow who was hoisted upon the counter by his pards amid the cheers of the house.

"Thet's one of them," murmured the man from Dakota. "We'll wait for his toast."

The ruffian's head almost touched the rafters above when he straightened on the counter and cast his eyes down on the motley dark-shirted and bronzed crowd below.

"You're mistaken 'bout thet poic bizness, Fancy," he said with a laugh. "I never fooled with verses, but I used ter hold a tolerable grip on rhyme when I war a kid."

"All right, Dan! Give us ther toast."

"Hyer goes! You'll excuse ther bad meter," and the man on the counter sung out:

"Hyer's ter Pistol City's pards,
G'loots whose heads ar' level!
We kin whip our weight in wild-cats
An' twist horns from ther devil!"

A smile stole over Cool Conrad's countenance.

"Thet takes ther cake! Hurrah fer ther poicariate ov Californy! Now, boys—"

"Hold on!" interrupted the man on the counter throwing up his hand. "Thar's another verse."

"No more," said the detective, in firm tones. "The lie and the boast will suffice. I'll send you down the dark trail with your toast unfinished."

It was no easy matter to quiet the boisterous crowd in the saloon.

They were still applauding Dan's horrid attempt at poetry, undreamful of the cool character who was covering him with a revolver that never failed.

All at once the sharp report of a fire-arm cut the bracing air of night, and the man on the counter leaped up against the rafters, and came down among the thunder-struck pards like a toppling cliff!

It was the death work of a second!

Two camp roughs went to the floor under the weight of the falling body, and the utmost confusion reigned.

"You may finish that toast where fiends will laugh at it," ejaculated the man outside, as he

stepped toward the saloon with the smoking revolver in his hand. "There is yet another among you, and I'll get him before I turn my back on your infamous camp."

He was met at the door by half a dozen figures. Wild cries and threats, with oaths of vengeance, saluted his ears, but they only brought a brighter and a fearless flash to his eyes.

"I don't want you," he said, in firm tones to the roughs in the door. "Send out to me the man who belonged to Captain Conrad's band when they hanged the boy gold-hunter in ther Colorado canyon. He is in there somewhere."

"Durn yer; ye've killed one ov Captain Noll's old band already!" was the reply.

"I know thet. I want ther other now."

"Mebbe he ain't hyer."

"Hyer I am!" exclaimed a loud voice, and a tall fellow with unusually-broad shoulders pushed his way toward the door. "I've dipped my hands in Dan's blood. Show me the bound thet tumbled 'im without mercy. Whar is ther man-hunter from ther North?"

The speaker reached the threshold of the den with the last word on his lips; he stepped out with eyes on fire and a revolver in either hand.

Cool Conrad, waiting for his victim, stood no twenty feet from the door.

He had the air of a man who is confident that he is about to achieve a great success, that he has reached the end of some great work.

"I am here!" he said in clear tones to the man who landed with a bound on the ground in front of Holy Hank's. "I have the mate of the bullet that dropped yer pard for you."

In a moment later the doom of the miner-rough would have been spoken if a long black cord with a noose at one end had not left the hand of a man who had risen to his feet a short distance behind Cool Conrad!

The cast in the night was as true as if it had been made at noonday.

The lasso noose fell over the detective's head and tightened on his shoulders, as a quick jerk almost threw him off his feet.

"Ha! ha! Caught this time, my Dakota fox!" laughed a cruel voice, as the whole crowd rushed forward to riddle Cool Conrad with their revolvers.

For once in his life the cool man from the North seemed thunderstruck.

"Kiver him with yer droppers, but don't touch a trigger!" said the man who had cast the lariat with such signal success and in the very nick of time. "Ef we don't hev a picnic now, yer kin kick me ter ther coast. I am hyer, Cool Conrad! Look inter ther face ov Oregon Noll, an' read yer doom!"

The speaker had halted before the detective and with a leer of triumph in his eyes.

This was the man whom Red Roy had boasted of killing in his cabin.

Cool Conrad could not resist a start.

"I thought Red Roy finished you!" he said, like a man forced to speak.

"Then Red Roy did it, eh?" cried Captain Noll. "I wasn't ther victim. He opened my door an' shot another man!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SHADES OF DEATH.

THE night so full of events for Pistol City wore on toward the dawn of another day.

There was no longer a wild boisterous gang of bronzed toughs at Holy Hank's, for it had been dispersed by the tragedy and capture just related, and the lingerers at the counter talked with sober tongues about a terrible vengeance which they asserted the new day was to witness.

What had become of Cool Conrad?

If the reader could have stolen unchallenged to within a few feet of Oregon Noll's shanty, he would have seen the dark figures of six men whose positions proved them guards over some one on the inside.

If he could have passed them and entered the cabin itself, he would have encountered a fine-looking man standing erect against a wooden post, to which he was secured by ropes stronger than any human arm in the Golden State.

At the end of his hunt at last!

The men who had been tracked from lair to lair had turned on their hunter, and that just before he had finished his work.

The tin lamp that illumined the interior of Captain Noll's shanty revealed the man lashed to the post.

He was not the sole occupant of the place.

Reclining on a blanket within reach of the post and its captive was a stalwart fellow who appeared to be asleep, but, in reality, he was watching Cool Conrad from the depths of eyes that glittered like a basilisk's.

The two deadly enemies were within arm's reach of each other.

Oregon Noll and his hunter, his indefatigable tracker, were beneath the same roof, but the hunter-tiger had become the prey.

"Won't I make him see the sun fer the last time to-morrow?" said the gold-camp desperado to himself, as he eyed his enemy. "He doesn't flinch, an' yet I kin see thet he is busy thinkin'. They named 'im rightly when they called 'im Cool Conrad; but I'll try his coolness when mornin' comes."

The minutes, as they resolved themselves into hours, left Captain Noll watching his enemy with the same gleaming eyes and interest unabated.

Not once did Cool Conrad cast a glance toward him; his eyes were turned toward the door which he faced, but not with that expectant look which a man in his situation might be expected to have.

Within and without all was still.

Toward morning Holy Hank sold his last whisky, took a look at his patched face for the last time, shut up his trap, and went to his shanty.

The vigils of Captain Noll and his men did not cease.

Pistol City had in its keeping the most important prisoner it ever held.

It lacked but a few minutes till daylight when the boss of the gold camp left his couch and glided toward Cool Conrad.

Suddenly the eyes of the two men met, and for some time they gave each other look for look without a word.

"I want ter ask yer a question, Conrad," said Noll, at last.

"Well?"

"Have you finished Silver Chick?"

"No."

"That's all. By heavens! I war afraid yer hed met an' wiped 'im out."

Captain Noll seemed relieved; then, stepping back a pace and folding his arms on his broad chest, he went on:

"You don't expect mercy at our hands, I imagine?"

"Mercy?"

The word had a sound that seemed to amuse Cool Conrad.

"I haven't mentioned that word for years," he said. "I never gave it a thought."

"Then, ov course, you don't expect nothin' ov ther kind."

"From you, Captain Noll? No!"

"An' you sha'n't be disapp'inted! Thar war seven ov us two weeks ago; now, countin' Silver Chick, ef he's alive, thar's but three. I came up too late last night ter save Dan, but not too late ter throw a winnin' card on ther board. Marmoset played a cool game awhile afore you came on, Conrad. Doctor Pablo caught ther two girls somewhar among ther mountains an' fetched 'em inter camp, but ther boy took 'em away from ther whole gang with two six-shooters. Ther boy turned on ther doctor, then—"

"And killed the Mexican serpent?" finished the detective.

"No; they lowered him inter Satan's Hotel an' promised ter cut ther rope, but you came an' interrupted ther sport. Afterward, it war discovered, ther ther rope hed been cut all ther same; but ther boys say they didn't do it."

Cool Conrad did not respond.

He knew one person who hated Doctor Pablo enough to cut the rope that held him over the black depths of the pit in the ground, but he did not thrust his opinion on Oregon Noll.

"Another question," said the desperado instead of turning away as he showed signs of doing. "The first night you came ter Pistol City, Tunis, my spy, turned up missin'. Did you meet him?"

"Tunis? Oh, yes, the man who, with Silver Chick, dogged my steps in 'Frisco."

"Yes."

"An' he is missing? Have you hunted for him, Captain Noll?"

"Not much. He has been foully dealt with else he would have turned up safe afore this. Cool Conrad, you know whar Tunis is!"

Grating his teeth and with his bronzed hands clinched, Captain Noll stood before his handsome, helpless prisoner and glared into his face.

"Whar is Tunis?" he cried.

"Keeping Doctor Pablo company, I think."

"At ther bottom ov Satan's Hotel?"

"Yes."

"You sent him down thar?"

"It was a question of self-preservation," said Conrad coolly. "He dogged my steps here, he penetrated my disguise, called me Cool Conrad instead of Vaquero Van, and there was nothing left for him but Satan's Hotel."

For a moment it seemed as though Captain Noll would administer a terrible blow with his clinched hand, but, instead of doing so, he turned on his heel, and went to the door.

Opening it with a quick pull, he saw the figures of several of the guards and heard a salutation.

"Mornin', captain!"

"Yes, mornin', an' Cool Conrad's last day on earth!" was the reply.

The man tied to the upright post heard these words, but did not start.

Captain Noll stepped out and was soon surrounded by the guards.

"Git out every galoot in Pistol City," he said. "Tell each man to come hyer armed ter ther teeth. We settle with Cool Conrad at sun-up."

The six guards scattered, and Captain Noll stood in the bursting daylight alone.

"This is my day," he said, under his breath.

"The mornin' comin' up over ther mountain sees ther end ov a trail thet began in a canyon away up in Colorado. Yesterday, an' a part ov last

night even, war yer time, Cool Conrad; ter-day b'longs ter Pistol City an' her devils!"

He did not have to wait long for the miner-roughs to come to him from the little shanties, now plainly seen in the brightening dawn.

Each hut, as it were, yielded an occupant, and by and by the burly figure of Oregon Noll was distinguishable among the buzzards of the gold camp.

"Gentlemen, ar' ye all armed?" he asked the crowd.

The reply was the exhibition of the heavy six-shooters which the pards of Pistol City knew so well how to use when life or vengeance demanded.

"We want no successful interference this time," continued Captain Noll. "Remember that Marmoset an' ther two girls ar' loose somewhar."

"An' Red Roy, cap'n."

"An' Red Roy, durn 'im! Remember, I say, that they all want Cool Conrad out ov our hands, that a rescue may be attempted. It must not succeed! We end ther trail ov thet Dakota man-hunter ter-day er to-morrow fall ourselves afore his droppers. I am goin' ter send him after Tunis."

The men looked strangely at the speaker.

"Arter Tunis?" echoed Fancy Joe.

"That's what I said."

"An' whar is Tunis?"

"At ther bottom ov Satan's Hotel."

"Jehosaphat! who sent him down thar?"

"Cool Conrad. Look! ther sun is up now. We make Cool Conrad's trail end afore he touches yon point in ther mountain."

Captain Noll led a dozen members of the band back into the cabin.

"Ther sun is up an' we ar' hyer," he said to the man at the post. "Tunis wants ter see yer, Conrad!"

The two enemies looked at one another while Captain Noll spoke, but there was no reply.

In a few moments Cool Conrad was removed from the post, but ropes still secured his hands, and he was marched out into the presence of those outside.

They greeted the avenger-detective with looks of hatred and low curses, and stepped quickly forward at a signal from Oregon Noll and surrounded him.

"Keep an eye on ther street," whispered the boss of Pistol City to his pards. "Don't forget thet four of this man's friends still live."

Then he turned to the leaders of the crowd, and in loud tones issued his commands:

"Forward! straight ter Satan's Hotel!"

The bronze guard started and presented one of the strangest spectacles ever witnessed in a California camp.

In the right hand of each man glittered the polished barrel of a large revolver, and their merciless eyes saw more than the prisoner who, without a quavering muscle, walked erect in their midst.

They were watching the streets and the lanes between the cabins, as well as Cool Conrad.

The distance from Captain Noll's cabin to the abyss that yawned in the heart of the gold camp was not great, and when the halt was made near the brink, the men saw the severed rope that lay on the ground.

That piece of cord spoke Doctor Pablo's doom, but the pards of Pistol City did not bestow a second look upon it.

After the halt near the pit four men conducted Cool Conrad forward, and, stepping back, left him within three feet of the edge.

The day had fairly begun its reign.

The sun was mounting the heavens in golden splendor, and the cool winds of morning waved the long black locks of the fine-looking victim who had been brought there to die.

"Cool Conrad, this is ther day of Pistol City's vengeance," said Captain Noll. "Hyers ends ther trail struck in ther Colorado canyon. You see afore yer Captain Noll an' one ov his right bowers; they helped ter lift skyward ther boy galoot who wouldn't give his gold secret away. Silver Chick also lives. You hev failed a long ways this side ov ther haltin'-place mapped out when yer swore ter avenge Albert. It isn't much ov a revenge arter all, eh, Cool Conrad?"

The lips of the avenger-detective seemed to meet with more firmness than ever, but they did not reply to the desperado's taunt.

He was going to die and make no sign.

"Up with yer revolvers an' kiver Cool Conrad, boys," continued Captain Noll. "I'll give him two minutes in which ter jump inter Satan's Hotel, unriddled, er ter tumble inter it a human lead-mine. Yer hear thet, Conrad! Yer time begins now!"

Oregon Noll took out a watch and laid it in the palm of his left hand.

The thirty men who stood in a line before Cool Conrad looked over as many revolvers which covered his bosom.

What would the doomed detective do?

Did he expect a rescue?

"Yer first minute is up, pard," suddenly spoke Captain Noll glancing up from the dial in his hand.

The thrilling tableau remained undisturbed.

The watch ticked the seconds off clear and distinctly.

"Thirty seconds yet," said the big desperado again. "Make up yer mind mighty quick, Conrad. Jump or tumble!"

Still no reply: the only movement on Cool Conrad's part was a slight straightening of his figure.

"About ten seconds left!" parted Oregon Noll's lips, and then he shut the watch with a snap.

"Ready! men ov Pistol City," he said sternly. "Hyers ends yer tiger trail, Cool Conrad. Blood fer blood is ther motto hyer. Now, pards—"

"Drop yer shooters every mother's son ov yer. We hold a better hand than you!" said a voice.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TWO MORE.

"HOLY heavens!" exclaimed the captain of the gold camp executioners.

"By ther eternal! ther unwished-for hez occurred!"

The men who had turned half-way around without leaving their tracks, saw the sight that drew the language just recorded from Oregon Noll's lips.

It was a sight thrilling enough to startle the whole crowd, and one which did startle them.

At the mouth of one of the narrow camp thoroughfares which meandered between the cabins stood four persons, two young women, a youth, and a stalwart man.

They had stepped to the front when the eyes of the roughs of Pistol City were fixed on Cool Conrad, and when Captain Noll had closed his watch and was about to speak the detective's doom.

The boss of Pistol City knew the four at sight. He saw that two repeating rifles and four revolvers covered him and his band, and back of them he saw stern looks and flashing eyes.

It was Red Roy's voice that had commanded the thirty toughs of California to lower their pistols, and the stalwart fellow was looking steadily over the shining barrel of his rifle.

"Hang it all! we've got ter compromise with 'em!" growled Captain Noll to his pards. "They've got ther drop on us, boys. It gives Cool Conrad a new lease ov life, mebbe."

What! another lease of life for the merciless tracker who stood on the brink of Satan's Hotel? The thought made the toughs grate their teeth.

"Shall we open our batt'ries, captain?" continued Red Roy impatiently. "Ye'r ther first man I ever saw alive arter bein' shot through ther head at three paces, but never mind thet. Order yer pards' pistols down, er we proceed ter work our triggers."

Captain Noll scowled sullenly, and issued a command that seemed to bite his tongue.

There was no help for it.

"Come for'ard, straight toward us, Conrad," said Red Roy addressing the Dakotan. "We'll see who holds ther best hand."

Cool Conrad threw a look of triumph into Oregon Noll's face and stepped from the brink of the abyss.

"It won't be long, captain," he said. "When I am your equal with arms we shall meet again."

"That suits me!" was the quick answer. "You dare not settle it forever hyer."

In an instant a mad light burned in the detective's eyes, but he did not speak again until he stood before Red Roy.

"Here! cut me loose!" he said holding out his ccrded hands. "By heavens! I am going to end the second part of the game before I leave this tiger den."

"No!" cried Leo as her hand fell on Red Roy's arm. "Listen to me. Don't cut that man free. He has baffled me all along. There are not more than three of the Colorado band left. I haven't shed one drop of their blood in accordance with my oath. Don't sever his bonds. He—"

It was too late, for all at once the bowie of Red Roy cut Cool Conrad's ropes, and as they struck the ground Leo found her own revolvers in the grip of the cool hunter.

It seemed the work of a second—no more.

With a wild exclamation of baffled power the beautiful huntress sprung forward, but Cool Conrad, with a look that seemed capable of slaying, drove her back.

"My oath was taken before yours. Stand back, woman!" he said sternly, and while the last word still quivered his lips, he whirled and walked toward Satan's Hotel his eyes riveted on Captain Noll.

"We are equals now!" he said in challenging tones. "Throw up your weapons and defend yourself. We play our game out with the sun where he now shines."

There was the show of a movement, of a mad rush forward on the part of the men of Pistol City, but Red Roy's face dropped suddenly to the stock of his rifle.

"Back! let ther two men hev it, out whar they stand!" he said. "We end ther life ov ther first one thet attempts ter interfere!"

Captain Noll who threw up his hands did not stir from his tracks.

The two bitter enemies, hunter and hunted,

stood face to face with level ground between them, and a blue sky overhead.

They had met at last on an equality, and in the presence of the living population of the gold camp.

"What shall ther signal be?" asked Captain Noll. "This duel is to be fairly fought, ov course?"

"Yes! The man I have hunted down for the most heinous crime of the century I give a chance for life. The signal, Oregon Noll! Let one of your men throw up his hat."

"All right. Fancy Joe, take off yer sombrero an' throw it toward ther sky."

The handsome figure of Fancy Joe moved forward with his dark sombrero in his right hand.

"Toss'er up," said Captain Noll with a glance at the man with the hat.

The spectators of this mad meeting held their breath.

Fancy Joe had halted almost between the two men, and at a spot in plain view of both.

"Oh, Hades! thet's no way ter fight," suddenly sung out a voice in the crowd of Pistol City roughs. "Tie 'em tergether an' let 'em hunt hearts with knives."

"Hush!" shot from Oregon Noll's throat. "Throw up yer hat, Fancy."

Another second of silence and suspense followed, and then the hat left Fancy Joe's hand.

Instead of shooting straight toward the blue sky overhead it made a swift dash at Cool Conrad's face!

An exclamation of horror burst from the throats of the two girls at this infamous scheme to spoil the detective's aim, but it was speedily drowned by the report of two revolvers.

The spectators saw the twirling hat leap suddenly upward, and then shoot toward the ground at Cool Conrad's feet, while the boss of Pistol City reeled toward the brink of Satan's Hotel!

The trick intended to foil Cool Conrad had really foiled Captain Noll, for his bullet had hit the hat, while the detective's had reached its target!

The two shots were succeeded by exclamations of horror.

A dozen men sprung forward to catch the man who staggered toward the abyss.

"I see the last one here," murmured Cool Conrad, and his revolver spoke again.

This time the man whose hand was about to seize the stalwart fellow tottering over the abyss, stopped suddenly, threw up his arms and dropped.

While, with a strange cry, Captain Noll disappeared forever amid the blackness of Satan's Hotel!

"Hold your tracks, pards of Pistol City!" said Cool Conrad to the thunderstruck men of the gold camp. "The game has been played to the end so far as it can be played here. The bird you had in your hands at daylight is now in the bush!"

"Thet's a fact, but we'll all beat ther bush for him!" cried Fancy Joe, who stepped forward, a tiger in his eyes. "We'd hev died for Captain Noll, an' we'll avenge him!"

"All right, gentlemen. At all times you will find Conrad ready."

The speaker moved toward the little party waiting for him in the street a few yards away, but kept an eye on the mountain roughs and a finger at the trigger.

"Here, do you want these now?" he said in a triumphant tone to Leo, as he extended the two revolvers.

"What use are they when there's no victims for their contents?" was the response. "Cool Conrad, though you are Albert's brother, I almost hate you!"

A quiet smile appeared at the corners of Cool Conrad's mouth.

"Take ther droppers, Leo," said Red Roy. "Thar's one more chance for you. Silver Chick is still alive."

The huntress started with a cry of joy, and reached out her hand for the weapons.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"I don't know, but he kin be found."

"And I will find him! I give you fair warning, Cool Conrad, that you thall not cheat me out of the life of the man who put the rope over the boy's head!"

"Very well," smiled the detective. "Let it be a race for the last man, Leo. If you find him first, kill him; but beware! I'm likely to turn up at the last moment."

The party of five held the men of Pistol City at bay until the cabins hid their figures.

To tell the truth, the terrible ending of the morning's game seemed to have paralyzed the toughs of the gold camp.

"Don't be fools an' rush ter death," said Fancy Joe as he planted himself resolutely before the gang. "Don't fool with a man who kin shoot with a hat flung in his face. An' he's backed by strong help, too. There's one chance ag'in' Cool Conrad. He'll turn on Silver Chick now—ther last pard ov Captain Noll's Colorado band. He'll find Silver Chick too. Thet man could track a summer zephyr. Thar's one chance ag'in' him, I say."

"Silver Chick must be warned?"

"Thet's it."

"But who knows whar he is?"

"I kin find him."

"How soon?"

"Inside o' four days. I kin beat Cool Conrad ter ther last man."

"Then, beat him thar, Fancy! Let ther last man avenge ther six shot dead by ther hand ov ther Dakota Trailer."

"I'll do it er die!"

"An' you'll come back—"

"When Silver Chick hez got thar!"

"All right, Fancy. We commission you messenger ov warnin' an' vengeance."

"An' I'll do my duty!"

The sun had not passed the degree reached when Cool Conrad's revolver spoke the doom of Oregon Noll and pard, when a horse bearing an athlete, dark-faced and handsome, dashed over what was called in Pistol City "the Frisco trail."

The rider was not Cool Conrad, but the gold camp's "messenger of warning and vengeance," and he galloped forward with eagerness and victory blazing up in his eyes.

On, on went the horse that seemed as eager to reach the goal far away as the man in the saddle.

The sun went down and rose again, set once more and came up refreshed to illuminate the wild landscape of Californian beauty.

Fancy Joe seemed proof against fatigue.

If he had closed his eyes it was in the saddle; he looked as fresh now as when he had started from the gold camp.

At last he rode slowly down the streets of San Francisco.

"Hyer at last!" parted his lips in joyful accents as he dismounted, and walked toward one of the most famous houses in the celebrated city.

It was Monte Merle's old palace of sin.

He rung the bronze bell and was ushered beyond the threshold.

Two minutes later he encountered a magnificent-looking man on the broad stairway.

"Great heavens! Fancy Joe!" exclaimed the handsome fellow. "What's ther news from Pistol City?"

"Yer ther last man, Silver Chick."

The listener started slightly and shot a look deep into Fancy Joe's eyes.

"Whar's Captain Noll?"

"Dead!"

"An' Jaguar Jerry?"

"Dead!"

"An' Dan, an' all ther rest ov ther old band?"

"Dead!"

"Who did it all?"

"Yer oath-bound enemy, Chick—Cool Conrad from Dakota. I'm a messenger ov warnin' an' vengeance from ther boys. Ye'r the last man, Chick. He'll turn on yer now."

A dark cloud swept across Silver Chick's face, fire flashed up in his eyes.

"All right!" he said. "If Cool Conrad wants ter die let him come. Ther last man holds ther winnin' hand!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LAST MAN.

It was all right now.

So confident was Fancy Joe that Cool Conrad would get shot dead the moment that he entered the monte-bank in search of the last man, that he thought of going back to Pistol City with the assurance of victory on his tongue.

But, after all, he resolved to wait and see if the avenger-detective did come.

And so he stayed.

Several days passed, and no tragedy occurred beyond the threshold of the elegant play-house now presided over by Silver Chick, whom all the frequenters had come to know as Monte Merle's brother.

It was noticed that from under his midnight lashes Silver Chick scrutinized every visitor, and that Fancy Joe eyed them all from a convenient nook, where he was not a very prominent figure himself.

"He's not goin' ter come," said Silver Chick to himself the night of the ninth day of watching and waiting. "The madman has met his match somewhar among ther mountains. Mebbe ther buzzards ov Pistol City found him, an' hed a settlement. Fancy Joe kin go back ter camp, an' I'll run this gold-mine awhile longer."

It was near midnight that same night when the bell of the monte-bank rung clearly, and the usher admitted a young person who had very black eyes, and a small mustache of the same hue.

He passed into the house and went up-stairs to the faro-room, where he stood near one of the tables, and watched the game with a good deal of interest.

"My God! whar hev I seen them ar' eyes afore?" ejaculated Fancy Joe, who was on the watch. "I don't recollect ov hevin' run ag'in' 'em in 'Frisco, but I've seen 'em somewhar in my time. Let me think."

And Fancy Joe puzzled his brain, but wrought nothing satisfactory from the mystery.

He was watching the visitor when Silver Chick entered the room, when the black eyes suddenly flashed with a marvelous light, and their possessor started perceptibly.

"Somewhar, ez sartain ez fate, hev I seen them peepers. Why can't I git a grip on time an' place?"

At that moment Silver Chick approached the young man, and the eyes of the pair suddenly met.

"Aha! you are Monte Merle's successor, ar'n't you?" said the youth, whom a quick stride carried to Silver Chick's side.

"I am Silver Chick, an' I run this palace at present. D'yer want a place at the table?"

"Not now; but I want a word with you in private."

"In private, eh? Ef you've lost hyer let me refer yer ter one ov ther rules ov ther house: 'Losses must be won back.'"

"I have not lost," was the quick answer. "I have some valuable information for you."

Silver Chick looked again into the speaker's eyes.

This person was not Cool Conrad; he had not the physique of the merciless trailer; Conrad was past forty; this visitor a mere boy.

"We'll go to my private room ef you have information," he said. "This way please."

Fancy Joe saw how quickly the young person turned to follow Silver Chick and he left his station also.

"Thet's a fish we've not been lookin' for in ther net," he murmured. "I can't intrude on ther private confab, but I kin be nigh all ther same."

Silver Chick led the way to the floor below and thence into a small room elegantly fitted up by Monte Merle for private quarters.

The door shut noiselessly behind the pair, and put an end to Fancy Joe's espionage.

"This is my private shanty," said Silver Chick turning on the person he had conducted across the threshold. "Now, young man, spit out yer information. We run everything on fast time hyer."

The youth covered the distance between himself and Silver Chick, with a single stride and the black eyes suddenly gleamed with a tiger's spirit.

"Silver Chick, don't you know me?" was the low question.

"No."

"You're looking for Cool Conrad, are you not?"

"What's thet ter you?" exclaimed the 'Frisco sport.

"Much. You've been expecting the Dakota Detective, and yet you have failed to guard against me."

"I don't know. Who ar' you?"

"Leo!"

Despite his vaunted courage Silver Chick recoiled a pace.

"Not a word, not a cry!" continued the visitor, and instantly there appeared in the gloved hand a revolver whose lock gave forth no sound as it was prepared for the shot. "I am ahead of the man who has sworn to take your life. He will reach you, Silver Chick, but too late! All along, until this time, he has baffled me. I've got to fulfill but one vow and that was when I stole back into Pistol City and severed the rope that suspended Doctor Pablo, the Santa Cruz of my life, over the depths of Satan's Hotel. One by one the members of the band who hanged Albert the boy gold-hunter in the Colorado canyon have been snatched from my avenging hand by Cool Conrad, Albert's brother. I am the person who warned Captain Noll in the city when Cool Conrad found him here; I am the '4-11-21' of the mysterious message. Look me in the eye, Silver Chick, I am Leo, Albert's betrothed and his avenger!"

Silver Chick, the gambler, stood before the revealed girl like a person suddenly aroused from a dream.

He could hardly believe the situation real. Instead of Cool Conrad, Leo had come; his monte palace had been invaded by an enemy as subtle and as dangerous as the Dakotan himself.

"Stand up and die like a man!" Leo went on after a short pause. "I have come here for a life, and I will not depart without it."

Before Silver Chick could move, he saw himself covered by the weapon of his visitor.

"I'm ter be shot down like a dog?" he growled.

"Yes."

"They'll kill you for it twixt hyer an' ther sidewalk."

"I'll take the risk!"

A few feet beyond the door a man was coming up the richly-carpeted stair without the semblance of noise.

He reached the corridor which led to the monte king's private room and his eyes caught sight of Fancy Joe against the wall in a listening attitude.

"The watch-dog is on guard," this person said to himself, and the next minute several strides carried him to the desperado.

When Fancy Joe least expected an attack a pair of hands encircled his throat, and he was almost lifted from the floor by the tightening grip.

The glimpse he got of his assaulter's face told that he recognized him.

"My God! Cool Conrad!" he managed to gasp.

With herculean force the new-comer pushed Fancy Joe to the floor, and held him there till consciousness left his brain.

"I'll invade the last lair now," and he laid his hand on the knob of the door.

It yielded without the semblance of a sound, and he put his left foot across the threshold.

There was the subtlety of the panther about the movements of this terrible man, who had come at last and when he was least expected.

Leo's back was turned toward the door, but the change in Silver Chick's countenance told her that somebody had just entered the room.

She turned, looked once, and then ejaculated: "God above! you here at last?"

Cool Conrad's answer was a smile and a flash of triumph in his eyes.

He darted at the girl, and seizing the wrist of the hand that clutched the revolver, hurled her almost against the wall.

"I'll keep your hands bloodless, and do the killing myself!" he said, looking at her a second. "Silver Chick, I've found the last of the Colorado hangmen!"

The sudden coming of the tracker had almost deprived Silver Chick of the power of volition, but the words just spoken threw him into active life.

He started back, and, quick as a flash, threw one hand behind him.

"All right, Cool Conrad!" he hissed, as the movement was made. "I've waited ten days to kill you!"

"And I've waited that long to finally avenge Albert."

Two revolvers flashed in the light of the brilliant burner overhead, but there was but one report.

The handsome man who staggered toward the window that looked out upon the great city of the gold coast was Silver Chick, the monte king!

Leo reached Cool Conrad's side as the dead desperado sunk to the floor.

"You've cheated me again," she said.

"And for the last time," was the answer.

"After years of trailing, Cool Conrad has reached the end. Come; let us go. No sound leaves this room. The winners and losers at the tables do not dream that the boss of this monte den is dead."

Cool Conrad kept his hand at Leo's wrist as he led her from the place.

In the corridor she saw the unconscious figure of Fancy Joe, and looked into the detective's eyes.

"Only a watch-dog. He's not dead, but harmless," Cool Conrad said, and they passed down the broad stairs together.

Out in the streets Leo separated herself from his grasp and said:

"What's going to become of you now?"

"I don't know—I don't care! And you?"

"I shall go back to Floss, who is my sister—the only one besides myself saved from the wreck of the hacienda home. If I had not accidentally discovered our relationship by a certain birthmark on her shoulder, I should exile myself forever from civilization. Do we part forever where your trail ends, Cool Conrad?"

Leo held out her hands and felt them touched by the detective's fingers.

"I fear it is forever. Frisco loses Cool Conrad for all time to-night. They thought Albert had no kin, and when they found out their mistake, they thought he was no match for them all. Ask the seven dead men who lost the life game in city and mountain camp. Lean over Satan's Hotel and ask Oregon Noll, then walk into yon monte den and ask the man lying dead in the little room. Go back to Floss and to Marmoset. They will unite their lives before long—I know it. Give them the blessing of Conrad, the Avenger. Good-by!"

The hands fell apart and Cool Conrad turned his back on the girl in whose black eyes was a moisture produced by his earnest words and his parting.

She watched him until he had passed out of sight.

"A strange man!" she said. "I have heard of inveterate haters and merciless trackers, but this one surpasses them all. I see Albert's manliness in his eyes. Why didn't I keep him here?" It was too late; Cool Conrad had vanished.

Three months later in a certain parsonage in San Francisco two handsome young people were made man and wife in the presence of Leo, who greatly resembled the bride, and a man who called himself Red Roy.

We leave the reader to guess the identity of the happy pair believing that to him it is no insoluble mystery.

"I'll find that man and fetch him back ter yer, Miss Leo," said Red Roy when he went to part with the huntress after the ceremony. "I'll show Cool Conrad that he can't escape when you want him found."

More than six months passed away, and one day Red Roy presented himself to the beautiful but baffled avenger in the gold-coast capital.

He was received with a smile, and was eagerly questioned.

The story he told Leo was that he had found Cool Conrad at last, that he had penetrated to Pistol City, no longer a thriving gold camp, but a deserted place, as if some curse had fallen upon it, and that he had found Cool Conrad a bonanza king among the silver hills of Colorado.

He was Cool Conrad still, despite his anxiety to lose the identity of that terrible name, the same man who had hunted the California gold buzzards down, and whose hand had kept stainless the hands of Leo, Albert's love.

The wound given him by Captain Noll, the night of the bowie duel in the mountain pass, had not prevented him from reaching the end of his life trail; vengeance and justice had contributed to a wonderful recovery, and he had gone straight to the mark. As has been said, Pistol City was found deserted by Red Roy.

The old inhabitants had gone to other fields, and Holy Hank, with the marks of Floss's whipping on his face, opened another whisky den where there was no Cool Conrads to add excitement to his daily business.

Leo still lives in 'Frisco and frequents the home of Floss, Marmoset's young and beautiful wife, and Red Roy flits from camp to camp whose inhabitants always hear before he leaves how he once hung doomed in the dark depths of Satan's Hotel.

Let us end our romance here.

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